Performing Rio de Janeiro: Artistic Strategies in Times of Banditocracy

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Abstract:
This essay analyzes selected pieces by four artists (or group of artists) performed in and with Rio de Janeiro during the last decade: Ronald Duartes’ War is War, a series of visual actions realized in the city’s streets; Michel Melamed’s black-box participatory piece Regurgitofagia; Lia Rodrigues Companhia de Danças’s dance performance, Porróca, created out of Rio’s traditional art circuits; and Ações Cariocas, a series of street actions performed in a downtown public square by the essays’ author, Eleonora Fabião. In the essay, Fabião proposes that these works employ a multiplicity of artistic strategies in order to respond to what she calls “banditocracy”: a violent, homogeneous and static political formation in which the lines between law and lawlessness become blurred in a city marked by a drug war.

Artists don’t make art [...]. They make things happen.
William Pope.L, The Friendliest Black Artist in America

A Post-Colonial Postcard
Please imagine a postcard of Rio de Janeiro. It is an image of the green, yellow and blue Brazilian flag with its white stars and emblazoned words: “ORDER AND PROGRESS.” It is morning—a windy, fresh morning of a luminous spring day in Rio de Janeiro. It is November 28th 2010. The landscape behind the flag is not the Copacabana Beach, nor the sun-tanned body of the girl of Ipanema, nor the Carnival Parade—images that usually adorn such postcards—but the Complexo do Alemão (German’s Complex). Complexo do Alemão is a neighborhood composed by 13 “favelas” (in a move against the word’s pejorative connotations, now mostly called “communities”) and inhabited by approximately 90,000 people—a predominantly low income population living in varied conditions from shacks to modest houses. On this blue day with few clouds and no kites, a police helicopter flies across the sky while three black-clad policemen from a Special Operations Unit raise the colorful national emblem. The atmosphere is tense, as is the case in many of Rio’s poor neighborhoods. During the past decades, several of them have become battlefields wherein varied factions with divergent political and economic interests are engaged in armed conflict. Part of the police fights the drug barons and their gangs, while another—associated with drug trafficking groups—sells them armaments, covers up their crimes, and grants privileges to their imprisoned members. These drug trafficking organizations dispute territories among each other in order to expand their business. Militias, comprised mostly of former and current policemen, firemen, and prison guards, fight against drug trafficking gangs to obtain local power and charge the communities for their “protection” (and other services such gas distribution and cable TV installation). From their offices, penthouses, helicopters, jets, yachts and cars, corrupt politicians participate in these bloody disputes without soiling their hands, as the working class families that live in these occupied territories develop everyday strategies to survive in a combat zone.

Luiz Eduardo Soares, a Brazilian anthropologist and political scientist who specializes in public security, suggests that in this multi-vectored minefield of interests, the key concern is not how Rio de Janeiro’s police should proceed to abolish drug trafficking. Soares warns that “the polarity structured in the question (police versus drug traffickers) hides the real problem: there is no polarity. Constructing this polarity—that is, separating bandit and policeman, creating clear distinctions between the criminals and law enforcement—must be the most important and urgent goal of any serious security policy. There is no significant mode of criminal action in Rio that does not involve corrupt policemen. This is the only explanation for the existence of both arms trafficking and the militias.”¹ This “absence of polarity” diagnosed by Soares—which is not the absence of divergent interests, but the absence of opposed modes of subjectivity since most factions involved have very similar objects of desire and modes of desiring—forms the core of what I call banditocracy. Banditocracy is the name I propose for this type of homogeneous and static political formation where the lines between law and lawlessness, state institutions and criminal groups get blurred before the eyes of perplexed citizens, honest policemen and ethical politicians. It is the name I give to a pathological mode of collective subjectivity where democratic agency, which should be based on the negotiation of
difference, is paralyzed by violence, fear and fraud. Banditocracy is a mode of autocracy predicated on corruption and impunity. It is a state of corruptibility so intense and widely disseminated in Rio, that it has become a mode of sociability. This essay presents selected works created by artists in Rio de Janeiro that respond to this state of things. I examine specific artistic strategies developed in contraposition to the deterioration of the social fabric and the atomization produced by the banditocratic formation. I propose that these micro-political performative acts must be carefully considered for the elaboration of governmental and nongovernmental macro-political actions.

Flag-raising, 2010.

Photo: Sergio Moraes/Reuters

November 28th 2010 was no ordinary day. The Brazilian Armed Forces participated for the first time in a collaborative operation with Rio de Janeiro police to expel drug trade and organized crime from Complexo do Alemão (the navy provided weapons and tanks, and the army troops and more weapons). This joint action, which culminated with the raising of the national flag at Complexo do Alemão, produced different responses from various segments of the population. Luiz Eduardo Soares, for instance, emphasized that the army should not engage in police work because “it is neither trained nor equipped for it.” He has argued for a long-term, systemic plan for the eradication of drug-related violence in which the armed forces must actively participate by performing their core functions: controlling the country’s borders and aerial space, preventing the arms smuggling, and dismantling illegal ports, airports and other such points of entry. A counter-argument to Soares’ approach, given the urgency of the situation, is that Rio’s police force is so deteriorated that, in this case, the participation of the armed forces was necessary. There are others, however, who believe that military action is the only solution to the current situation and who advocate for the incorporation of the armed forces into the standard protocol of the drug war.

Combining symbolism and facticity, the flag-raising was a performative act that marked the occupation of Complexo do Alemão after a week-long war—a confrontation initiated by the drug
traffickers in retaliation against a pacification project implemented by Rio de Janeiro’s state government starting in 2008. This project contemplates the gradual installation of UPPs (Pacifying Police Units) in different communities of the city, who are responsible for the expulsion of organized crime from the area, an intensive territorial police presence, as well as for improving social services for the local residents. The raising of the flag at Complexo do Alemão on November 28th 2010 indicated the imminent implementation of a UPP in that community, an action with dubious consequences for the local population since it meant the implementation of a new and intensive system of territorial control. This performative act also carried many other contradictory meanings and messages: it represented official acknowledgement that many other areas of the city, including municipal and state institutions, are literally out of governmental control; it was the climax of a joint demonstration of force promoted by the federal, state and city governments as well as by private investors to “clean” Rio de Janeiro’s image in preparation for the Soccer World Cup in 2014 and the Olympic Games in 2016; it fed a sensationalist media spectacle that flattened the situation’s complexities since, regrettably, the mass media rarely discusses violence preventively or substantially; it begged for reflection on the meaning of the “local” in times of neo-liberalism and globalization at Complexo do Alemão (since many of the poor houses we see in the “postcard” are connected to cable and satellite television in a country that is ranked third in the world in terms of wealth inequality); it conjured the nationalistic fervor promoted by the military dictatorship that ruled Brazil from 1964 to 1985 (a fabricated mode of national identity rooted in soccer passion and class differentiation rather than democratic discussion and social justice); it also served as a clear sign that the drug business, at least in its sedentary mode of territorial occupation, was becoming inoperative; and, hopefully, the flag-raising at Complexo do Alemão also meant the decline of banditocratic subjectivity.

But what about art?

My goal here is to present selected artistic works created during the last decade by four artists (or groups of artists) in and with Rio de Janeiro—works produced in times of post-modern, post-colonial, neo-liberal, globally-warmed, fanatically-armed, capital-oriented banditocracy. The works assembled here are similarly performed in dialogue with the city, but vary in terms of genre and style (I will discuss hybrids of site-specific art, urban intervention, theater, performance art and dance). They all share the same geopolitical context, but deploy distinct artistic strategies and modes of incorporating and exorcizing Rio de Janeiro’s history, actuality and future. Ronald Duarte’s War is War and Lia Rodrigues Companhia de Danças’ recent works directly respond to the post-colonial postcard I’ve just presented, while the Ações Cariocas series (street pieces I performed in downtown Rio) and Michel Melamed’s Regurgitofagia critically reflect on spectatorship, participation and relationality in Rio’s charged context. Despite their differences, all four cases address the questions formulated by Brazilian philosopher Peter Pál Pelbart’s in our current banditocratic context. “What does life mean today?” Pelbart asks, “How can one understand life’s potency in this context?” “Which concrete devices, minor and major, do we have today
to transform the power upon life into life’s potency?” and finally, “How do these questions reformulate the idea of resistance today?” I am particularly interested in the power of artistic devices to transform mechanisms of domination into capacities for inventing and living potent lives. I am interested in the potency of performative bodies and performative acts—bodies and actions that, by deconstructing habits, de-mechanizing perception, subverting established norms, and suspending fixed meanings, reinvent possibilities for people, groups and places. I propose to focus on actions and bodies engaged in creating new modes of relation and new regimes of attention, searching to examine and reconfigure maps of inclusion and exclusion; bodies and actions that are fields of political resistance—resistant forces that, paradoxically, are extremely connective to the city. My point here is to map and to discuss the poetic and political strategies created by these artists in, with, and through contemporary Rio de Janeiro. I seek to investigate how, while responding to the current situation, they are working to “make things happen” as proposed by William Pope.L in the epigraph of this essay; how each one is working to create other possibilities for a city to exist and perform.

**War is War: Fake Blood and Raw Reality**


Photo: Ducha


Photo: Ducha

Photo: Wilson Montenegro


Photo: Fernando Rabello

Born in Rio de Janeiro, Ronald Duarte suggestively introduces himself as a “visual action artist.” Interested in working with “urban urgency,” “with that which must be done, said, exposed, visualized,” Duarte began to develop the series *Guerra é Guerra (War is War)* in 2001. From this series of visual actions, I will describe three:

1. *O que Rola Você Vê (What happens you see) (2001)*
   
   **Location:** action performed in Santa Teresa—a historical and class-diverse neighborhood of Rio de Janeiro; the area is surrounded by different communities which at that time were occupied and controlled by narco syndicates disputing territorial control among themselves and with the police.
   
   **Material:** a tank truck filled with water and red pigment and a fire hose.
   
   **Action:** to water Santa Teresa’s streets, to give it a blood bath: to wash and to stain at the same time.

2. *Fogo Cruzado (Crossed Fire) (2002)*
   
   **Location:** Santa Teresa neighborhood, specifically the streetcar tracks.
   
   **Material:** dark night, cloth, kerosene and fire.
**Action:** A group of 26 artists assisted Duarte in the performance of this visual action. Video documentation shows how passersby interacted with the piece. People jumped and ran alongside the fire lines. They played with fire. The police intervened.


**Location:** different streets of Rio de Janeiro.

**Material:** ice blocks of water with red pigment and blankets, specifically the ones used by homeless kids in the streets of Rio.

**Action:** to wrap an ice block with a blanket and to let it melt.

Ronald Duarte’s visual actions with fire, water and red pigment open the city’s wounds. By mixing painting and sculpture, abstractionism and figurativism, reds and yellows, fake blood and crude reality, Duarte officiates rituals on Rio de Janeiro’s body: “I need blood to inspire non-violence. I need to show the end of the world to talk about life principles.” Duarte’s visual actions give large-scale poetic evidence to what is hidden, undesired and unbearable. Rather than fetishizing violence, his artistic operations offer a way to deal with it: he offers aesthetics against anesthesia. Strategically, what the fake blood provides is a performative opportunity for the public to engage, from another angle, with those invisible forces that shape their daily lives, and, perhaps, to reflect about their positioning and options in the situation. It is hard to remain indifferent to the performative impact of Duarte’s operations, to the visceral images his actions generate, as well as to the political-aesthetic force he activates. It is hard to remain indifferent to his critical and lucid display of the city. As he says, “my works are screams.” Screams that re-launch Pelbart’s question to the citizens of Rio: What does life mean here and now? What does life mean to you here and now?

What gives Ronald Duarte’s images and actions their intense vibration is not only their scale, crudeness and cruelty, but also the surrounding “virtual images” they make visible—those images that we cannot actually see in them but that we can access through them. As suggested by Gilles Deleuze in *The Actual and the Virtual*, all actual bodies—a human body, a social body, or an object—are surrounded by a cloud of virtual moving images. In Deleuze’s words:

Every actual surrounds itself with a cloud of virtual images. This cloud is composed of a series of more or less extensive coexisting circuits, along which the virtual images are distributed and around which they run. [...] The virtuals encircling the actual perpetually renew themselves by emitting yet others, with which they are in turn surrounded and which go on, in turn, to react upon the actual.

In the same way, perception is irremediably informed by virtual dimensions. The perceptive act is an interaction of actual, mnemonic and imaginary forces encircling, informing and emitting one another. There is no actuality outside of the currents of pastness and futurity; there is no actuality outside the circuits of memories, imaginations, visions and desires. Ronald Duarte’s
action-images perform a poetic and necessary actualization of the city’s virtuals. They liberate hidden and repressed forces and evoke series of phantasmagorias that demand to be revised and reconsidered critically. They also ask, quite pragmatically, what other visions might be enacted for Rio de Janeiro today, tomorrow, the day after tomorrow, in ten days, in ten years, and in ten decades from now.

The piece *In Cold Blood*, for instance, is simultaneously an artistic act (an actual) and a vivid dialogue with the multiple and simultaneous temporalities of contemporary Rio de Janeiro (its virtuals). The list of virtuals surrounding such a powerful image is endless. I will bring into view only two of those virtuals, specifically two memories that energize the work. The first is an episode known as “massacre da Candelária” (the Candelária massacre), and the second is a work from 1969 by Portuguese artist Artur Barrio, who lives and works in Rio de Janeiro.

The Candelária massacre names a violent event in the city’s recent past (July 1993). The episode involved approximately 70 homeless kids who often slept on the streets around the Candelária Church in Downtown Rio and a group of vigilantes, a number of whom were active or former members of the police force. Many of the street children were involved in drug trafficking, petty theft, and prostitution. On the night of July 23, 1993, eight young people (between the ages of 11 and 20) were shot dead by a “vigilante death squad” in retaliation against a group of youths who had either allegedly thrown stones at police cars driving by during the day, or robbed the mother of a police officer in the area. Several others were wounded and their blankets were stained with blood. This episode became a tragic mark in Rio de Janeiro's history.


Photo: Cesar Carneiro
Courtesy: galeria milan

Another virtual surrounding *In Cold Blood* is Artur Barrio’s street work *Bloody Bundles: SITUATION* performed in 1969 in Rio de Janeiro. It is important to remember that the
Institutional Act #5 (AI-5) had been promulgated in December 1968, inaugurating the harshest period of the Brazilian military dictatorship. Through AI-5, Artur da Costa e Silva, the military president at the time, declared a general state of exception and suspended constitutional rights, thus legalizing ideological persecution and torture in the country. According to art historian Claudia Calirman, Bloody Bundles: SITUATION was “the most visceral work of art challenging the forces of oppression in Brazil at that time. Barrio bought 44 pounds of meat and bones and wrapped them in fabric and rope to make 14 bloody bundles, which represented the remains of people tortured during the dictatorship. They alluded to the lacerated limbs and mutilated corpses found in rivers and sewage sites during the military regime.” Possible articulations between the current banditocracy and the past military dictatorship would have to be carefully discussed and this is not my goal here. Nevertheless, I propose that in both situations, a state of exception was declared and implemented, albeit with different actors, objectives and spheres of influence. The simple and unavoidable fact I want to emphasize is that for the past several years, Rio de Janeiro has been dominated by another kind of authoritarian system built upon extreme violence. The motivations and modes of violence are very different, but the oppression is comparable.


Photo: Daniel Zarcos

Ronald Duarte also works on collaborative projects. This is the case in Fumacê do Descarrego (Discharging Incense Truck) by Grupo Rradial (Alexandre Vogler, Luis Andrade and Ronald Duarte), a work initiated in 2001. The project consists of small annual carnival parades; a group of friends dance around and inside an open truck as it moves through the streets of Rio de Janeiro. On top of this moving truck, an improvised chimney expels the smoke coming from two hundred pounds of burning incense. A mix of onion and garlic leaves, rosemary, benzoin, lavender, rue, and gunpowder (the gunpowder is an offer to Exu, the Orisha of movement and guardian of the streets), this “discharging” incense is frequently used in Afro-Brazilian religious rituals such as Umbanda and Candomblé. The “smoky truck” (“fumacê”) is also a familiar element in Rio’s life, and
looks like a vehicle used by public health departments in their fight against mosquitoes. Singing, dancing and playing instruments, the followers of the smoky truck perform a joyful and humerus rite for the city’s cleansing. Duarte and his partners, once again, produce an actual image charged by a vibrant virtual cloud. In this case, a quite literal and visible one made of perfumed smoke, vibrant music and dancing carnivalesque bodies.

Carioca Actions: The Aesthetics of Precariousness

Ações Cariocas (Carioca Actions—“carioca” refers to people born in Rio de Janeiro like me) is a series of seven actions I performed in 2008 at Largo da Carioca, one of the most bustling public squares and possibly the most socially heterogeneous space in downtown Rio de Janeiro. For many, Largo da Carioca is the heart of the city. My choice as a performer was precisely to occupy and to massage the cardiac muscle of my hometown by executing seven specific performative programs. By “program” I mean the plot elaborated by a performance artist before the execution of a performance. A program is a conceptually charged and clear-cut description of actions—a short explanation with no adjectives and verbs in the infinitive form—to be followed by the performer. The use of this word is inspired by Deleuze and Guattari’s idea that a program is the “motor of experimentation.” As proposed in their essay “How do you make yourself a Body without Organs?” the fulfillment of certain psychophysical programs allows for the de-mechanization of the organism and its milieu, the suspension of established behavioral habits and closed meanings, the subversion of the doxa, of good sense’s straightness and common sense’s fixity. In other words, the fulfillment of certain performative programs enables psychophysical and political experimentation and reinvention. Even if Deleuze and Guattari do not refer to performance art practices, I propose that performative programs are ways for making Bodies without Organs.

Description of four performative programs from the series Ações Cariocas:

Eleonora Fabião, Ação Carioca #1, 2008.

Photo: felipe ribeiro

Photo: Felipe Ribeiro


Photo: André Lepecki


Photo: Felipe Ribeiro

**Ação Carioca #1**

**Program:** To sit, barefoot, on a chair in front of an empty chair (from my kitchen). To write on a big sheet of paper: WE CAN TALK ABOUT ANY SUBJECT. To show the handwritten sign. To wait.
Excerpts from my notebook: This first action is not exactly about space or site specificity. It is about dimensions, about performing the opening of a dimension: “a state of art-without-art”. [...] To slow down spectacularity, to accelerate relationality; to invest in creating zones of instability, precarious territories where chair, ground, self, other, words, voice, communication keep changing significance. [...] At the end of each day I feel euphoric, electrified by this new way of relating with my city and my co-citizens.

**Ação Carioca #2**

**Program:** Bare feet at midday, take a pair of scissors and cut out the words written on the Brazilian flag: “ORDEM E PROGRESSO” (ORDER AND PROGRESS, a positivist slogan). To sew a piece of white cloth to recompose the flag. To separate and recombine the letters forming new words (maybe, new words that reveal the hidden meanings of ORDER AND PROGRESS).

Some words found: secret, power, mere power, devil, bone, nail, bone of nail, nail of bone, ego, imprisoned ego, pain, fear, mistake, regress, care, asshole, web, if, however, always, to measure, to bite, to pray, to spin, to murmur, to gnaw, to gnaw plaster cast, to hurt, to put plaster cast hurts… But the only way I found to place all letters back in the flag was: “the being always fat,” “the fat being, always” or “being always: the fat.”

**Ação Carioca #3**

**Program:** To polish, with brush and soap, a straight line across the ground of Largo da Carioca.

I opted to make a rectilinear line to contrast with the curvilinear design of the stone pavement, the socio-political chaos, and the baroque atmosphere (the mix of smells, noises, colors, gestures, preachers, vendors, prostitutes, music, pigeons, businesspeople is exuberant). A note from the notebook: “A kid approached me and said: ‘You are doing this because later a theater piece will happen here, right?’”

**Ação Carioca #7**

**Program:** Barefoot, take two jars—one made out of silver and one of clay. Fill one of the jars with water. Move the liquid from one to the other until it disappears completely. If someone comes close, I offer the two jars to the person so he or she may continue the action, or, I hand the person one jar so we can do the action together.

Differently from Ronald Duarte’s *War is War, Ações Cariocas* conceives strategies out of the imagery of violence and is not a large-scale urban intervention. The series acknowledges dialogism and subtlety as dramaturgical tools. As I understand it, subtle and dialogical gestures may produce deep resonances because they reverse the logic of violence, contradicting both the brutality and the protective mechanisms of isolation and indifference so common in Rio today. The option was to avoid redundancy and mimesis, to not replicate violence in order to denounce it. The option was to avoid being ironic or parodic in order to interact with Rio’s socio-political context. The decision was to activate
non-ordinary modes of relating with the city, its citizens, its history, with art and with myself by investing in receptiveness and flexibility. The proposal was to create new regimes of attention and modes of perceiving by generating extra-ordinary encounters and assemblages in a bustling tropical public square. The notion of “assemblage,” as theorized by Gilles Deleuze and articulated by Portuguese philosopher José Gil, is key to this project. In Gil’s words, to assemble means: “To create new connections between heterogeneous materials, new bonds, other passageways for energy; to connect, to put in contact, to symbiose, to make something pass, to create machines, mechanisms, articulations. [To assemble means] to ceaselessly demand new assemblages.” As I understand the performative programs of Ações Cariocas, they are precisely assembling machines—relational devices fueled by receptiveness, apparatuses created to associate distinct materials, reveal their potencies, and trigger new possibilities for themselves and their milieu. As I see them, many performance practices are ways to make the corporeality of assemblages visible as, for instance, a-person-and-a-chair as a body; or a person sitting in a chair in front of another person sitting in another chair as one single bi-cephalus, four-eyed and 12-legged body; or a Brazilian person moving water between a clay jar and a silver one evoking her African, Indian, European and Latin American mixtures.

Another important dramaturgical strategy concerns the modes of production of the Ações Cariocas series. It was part of these performative programs to use only things from my home in the street actions. Here, rather than considering the lack of resources as a weakness, as something to be avoided according to the logic of capital, these actions propose an inversion: to valorize precariousness, to embrace it, to investigate its temporal weight, its political force, aesthetic potency, corporeal strength, and philosophical energy. Precariousness here was a working tool and assembling mechanism as much as the jars, the scissors, the chairs, the soap, the skin, the flag and the words.

The choice was also to abandon art’s “proper” locations (this time like Duarte’s War is War) and to investigate its conditions of possibility out of the box (the gallery’s white cube or the theater’s black box). The result was the creation of a series of ambiguous situations where the entwinements of art and not-art, the fusions between spectatorship, authorship and simple co-existence, and the aesthetic-political continuum all complicate a strict definition of what a “cairioca action” might be. While discussing his concepts of “lifelike art” and “artlike life,” Allan Kaprow emphasized how “an artist concerned with lifelike art is an artist who does and does not make art.” And he added: “Anything less than a paradox would be simplistic.” It is quite possible that this is also the case in this circumstance—anything less than the precariousness of a paradox would be conceptually too rigid.

Finally, Ações Cariocas is a project of detoxification, an act of purging the toxins of fear via dialogue, friction and contact. Fear is a sophisticated biological weapon of mass manipulation to be meticulously disarmed. What guided me was the most simple desire to feel well again in Rio, to recover what is mine (this amazing place where I was born and grew
(up), to inhabit my public space, to rub against it, to love it, to produce active modes of belonging in this culture of fear, to laugh at banditocrats, to create new assemblages; to reconfigure myself and the city mutually and simultaneously, Eleonora and Rio de Janeiro as body—a body in state of endless formation.

**Regurgitofagia: The Electric Force Field of Co-presence and The Representational Short-Circuit**

![Utility pole and illegal connections for electricity](image)

Photo: eleonora fabião

Different from the works previously presented in this essay, *Regurgitofagia* (2004), a one-man show written and performed by Michel Melamed and co-directed by Alessandra Colasanti and Marco Abujamra, is not a street performance but a black-box piece. Performer and audience, with date, time and tickets set, meet to collectively investigate the meanings and modes of participatory performance. In the very beginning of the piece, spectators are informed by a recorded voice that “this performance makes use of a “pau-de-arara interface” (*pau de arara* is the name of a torture device frequently used to interrogate anti-regime militants during the Brazilian military dictatorship (1964–1985); its use was often combined with different torture techniques, primarily electroshock but also drowning, sexual abuse, burning and flogging). The recorded voice explains how the *pau-de-arara* interface will be activated during the piece: “the noises produced by the audience (applauses, laughs, coughs, etc.) will be captured by microphones, transformed into electric current, and discharged in the actor’s body.” By the end of the explanation, Michel Melamed enters the stage and plugs his wrists and ankles in the *pau-de-arara* relational machine: a theatrical apparatus designed to reveal, accelerate and materialize connectivity.

The more Melamed speaks and plays with words, the more his body spasms in response to the audience’s sonic reactions. His acting strategy is to mix genres—stand-up comedy, performance art, theater, and spoken poetry—in order to create an agile and responsive scenic body. His speech is at once comedic, poetic, rhythmic, acidic and sweet. He tells jokes and stories, makes free associations, articulates opinions, has poetic deliriums, enunciates world-views, viewpoints, points of view. Points—many of them: the boiling point, the meeting point, a period, a dot, a spot, the g-spot, points of light, meeting points, major points, minor ones... And, from the audience, I see a point of no return, a zero—representation’s ground zero or somewhere around this hole. The short-circuit of representation as conceived by Antonin Artaud’s *Theater of Cruelty: the paradoxical scene-not-scene*. As diagnosed by Jacques Derrida in “The Theater of Cruelty and the Closure of Representation,” Artaud announces representation’s limit: “The Theater of Cruelty is not a representation. It is life itself in its irrepresentability.” Yet it is theater—theater and its double. Artaud, the visionary schizo artist and thinker, generated a paradoxical zone that has been investigated and embodied by generations of performance artists. *Regurgitofagia*’s scene-not-scene throws us in this Artaudian hole, not coincidentally, with a session of electroshock therapy.

*Regurgitofagia*—which literally means “to expel when one is extremely full, to push out, to exorcize”—also evokes a seminal Brazilian strategy against cultural colonization: antropofagia (anthropophagy). Conceived by Brazilian modernist writer Oswald de Andrade in 1928, this anthropophagical strategy is inspired by a Tupi-Guarani ritual. These Native South Americans used to eat their enemies’ bodies (not just any enemy, but the bravest warriors) in order to absorb their knowledge and virtues. Inspired by this cannibalistic ritual, Andrade’s proposal was to devour the European avant-garde in order to create a genuine Brazilian art. Anthropophagy offered a way to resist by devouring and digesting, by reversing colonization. Anthropophagy also made our genuinely impure racial and cultural genealogy visible. Almost 100 years later, devoured by terabytes of information, stretched by globalization, and squeezed by the local socio-politics, Michel Melamed responds to the modernists: “We should vomit the excesses and evaluate what, in fact, we want to swallow back.” Let’s regurgitate, he argues, “because—differently from the avid anthropophagus—we have already swallowed too many things.”
Specifically in regards to spectatorship, the *pau-de-arara* relational apparatus operates in different yet interrelated ways: it amplifies the spectators’ presence and valorizes their dramaturgical contribution (aesthetic effect); it offers the possibility and delegates the responsibility of choice—to attack or not to attack, to protect or not to protect the performer by controlling one’s own and other people’s noises? (ethical effect); it makes us extremely aware of our own and the collective’s reactions, movements and attitudes (psychophysical effect); and it activates the sense of a collective body and demands capacity for negotiation since behavioral disagreements may happen at any moment (assembling effect). Importantly, this interface does not only connect performer and audience but audience with audience, that is, everybody present in the room. Here, following Erika Fischer-Lichte, the notion of *theater performance* is replaced by that of *theatrical event*.\(^{16}\) Spectacularity slows down and eventuality speeds up. Spectacularity slows down and relationality speeds up.

*Regurgitofagia* is not made for but with the audience. In interviews, Melamed plays with words to explain his interest in investigating the spectator’s dramaturgy, his interest in the exchange between the actor and what he calls the “spectactor,” between the author and the “spectauthor.”\(^{17}\) Crucial to the work is that *Regurgitofagia* does not allow for free-flowing engagement; just the opposite, it is an arena of tense encounters. The *pau-de-arara* torture machine is reversible. On one hand, the spectauthors “torture” the author with their deliberate or unintentional noises and, on the other hand, the actor “tortures” the spectactors by controlling their moves and exposing their attitudes. The fact is that we are all electrified. The interface impedes the performer’s automatism and the audience’s passivity. Violence, sadism and masochism are some of the potencies to be experienced and negotiated during the theatrical event. *Regurgitofagia*’s “drama” is not limited to the stage but includes the whole space, a place where the tense scene of co-presence is being performed, where the basic political experience of co-existing prevails. This “drama,” moreover, is not limited to the theater space, but also includes the city that inspires and energizes it. *Regurgitofagia* is an aesthetic micro-political experience that extends outwards into the participation of citizens in Rio’s charged socio-historical context. It is an electrified sadomasochist scene-not-scene conceived and performed in contemporary Rio de Electric Janeiro by an antenna performer and a bunch of electrified citizens. Much like the illegal and overloaded electric pole, it enacts Rio’s charged socio-historical force field.

**Lia Rodrigues Companhia de Danças and the Choreopolitical Move**

While during the 1980s and 1990s the Lia Rodrigues Companhia de Danças rehearsed and presented its pieces in venues located in Rio’s wealthier areas, in 2003 the company made a new choreopolitical move: an artistic residence at Casa de Cultura da Maré. Maré’s Culture House is a project developed by an NGO called *Redes de*
Desenvolvimento da Maré (Networks for the Development of Maré) located in Maré, a neighborhood composed of 16 communities. Situated in the same region as Complexo do Alemão, Maré is populated by around 132,000 people and is a drug trafficking zone as well. Redes’ Director, Shirley dos Santos, explains that Maré’s only theatrical stage at that time, a kind of circus tent—Lona Cultural Herbert Vianna—was located right on a hotly contested border zone between two enemy factions known, quite tellingly, as the “Gaza Strip.”

The company’s move from the Rio de Janeiro’s more affluent neighborhoods to Maré is a strategic dislocation that complicates conventional hierarchies between “center” and “periphery” (where “the periphery” is commonly and oddly perceived as “having no culture”). This move makes evident the importance of the so-called “periphery”—Lia Rodrigues Companhia de Danças’ arrival at Maré produced deep aesthetic and political changes in their work precisely as a result of the powerful cultural interlocution they found in the community. Maré offered a new ground to dance on: other modes of dwelling, other corporealities, and other modes of existing. It objectively and subjectively offered new ways of dancing and of grounding dance. At the same time, the company also intervened in the community’s everydayness with artistic and pedagogical projects. Their decision, from the very beginning, was literally to keep the doors open: the studio door remained open to those interested in taking movement classes, to those interested in watching rehearsals, or to those interested in attending the company’s performances.

In 2009, the company took one further step: their temporary artistic residence became a permanent home. Lia Rodrigues Companhia de Danças, in partnership with the NGO Redes, rented a warehouse in Maré and called it Centro de Artes da Maré (Maré Arts Center). After six years of collaboration, Shirley dos Santos, Redes’ Director, understood their presence as “part of Maré, much more than many inhabitants that were born here but who refuse their roots.” Together they renovated the new space and are now planning to raise more funds in order to subdivide it and open a cinema, a theater room, and the first Professional Dance School of Maré. Together they have been “redistributing the sensible,” to evoke Jacques Rancière's inspired concept. Their assemblage creates new modes of perceiving, sensing and occupying the city not only for the members of the company or the NGO, but also for everyone that assembles with them. Together, they have been reconfiguring long-established and stagnant configurations of inclusion and exclusion in Rio’s social and cultural cartography.

The company’s most recent piece, Pororoca, now incorporates two dancers from the community. Pororoca is the Tupi-Guarani name for the violent encounter of different water sources, as between a river and the sea. Pororoca describes explosion and the thunderous sound such encounters provoke.
According to Lia Rodrigues, the initial stimulus for the creation of the piece was a series of questions she posed to the eleven dancers: “How do eleven people live together in this specific space (a linoleum rectangle in a warehouse in Maré)? How do you organize yourselves? How do you dance together? How do you affect one another and are affected by each other? How do you deal with the elements and objects in this space?” She also asks other broader questions: “How do we survive in chaos? How do we find equilibrium in instability?” And, in addition to Rodrigues’ questions, I propose yet another one: How do we manage the pororoca experience of inhabiting Rio de Janeiro, its many cities and their thunderous encounters?

The result was more pegação (grabbing) than contact improvisation; more arrastão (dredging) than flow; more estregaçao (rubbing) than steps. The dancers and the choreography absorbed the noisy, agitated and hot space (around 100 degrees Fahrenheit) where the piece was generated. Even the still moments are still movements. A fleshy baroque composition, Pororoca explodes in multiple and simultaneous interactions. This eruptive force impedes the spectator from following either a single, stable, linear path, or a homogeneous, compact and unidirectional mass.
Here, the difference between “mass” and “multitude” proposed by Elias Canetti in *Crowds and Power* is danced. For Canetti, a mass is characterized by density and uniformity: it abolishes singularities. A multitude, as this baroque dancing conglomeration of *Pororoca* rehearses, is heterogeneous, complex and multi-vectored—a sum of singularities. Indeed, a multitude in its baroque extravagance has no hierarchies, “does not delegate power, does not intend to achieve and accumulate power, but rather, a multitude wants to develop a new potency of life, of organization, of production.” This concept of multitude, according to Paolo Virno in *A Grammar of the Multitude*, is not only opposed to the notion of mass, but to the political concept of “people” as the unifying component of the nation. Virno explains that these two competing concepts—“people” and “multitude”—played a primary role in the definition of the sociopolitical categories of the modern era, with the former prevailing in the end. But now, at a time when the political theories that have defined Western modernity are in acute crisis, the defeated notion of “multitude” is being recuperated. Baruch Spinoza, the 17th century philosopher, was the great defender of this notion of the multitude, which, as Virno points out, is “a plurality which persists as such in the public scene, in collective action, in the handling of communal affairs, without converging into a One, without evaporating within a centripetal form of motion. Multitude is the form of political and social existence for the many, seen as being many.” Spinoza’s proposal is that the multitude is the fundamental support of civil liberties. The multitude, not “the people,” is the referent from which to create new modes of governmentality, modes that may help eradicate banditocratic regimes based in oppressive massification and massive oppression. Modes of governmentality that can tolerate not only eleven dancers becoming-multitude, but eleven hundred, eleven thousand, eleven million individuations, with its eleven million genders, eleven million colors, and eleven million singularities being respected and valorized.

We live together by moving through, with and against each other in a compressed, accelerated and charged space. This seems to be the answer that those eleven dancers gave to Rodrigues’ choreographic stimulus. We rub, therefore we are. We assemble and ensemble, therefore we become. Our performative bodies are as collective as they are singular. In their experiment, art is a matter of incorporating space while being incorporated by it. It is an act of moving space while being moved by it. But what is particularly moving about their way of moving is the political mode of multitudinous grupality they envision while working in an occupied territory where power disputes are so violently demented and perversely banditocratic.

* Nine final lines

One city, four different artistic strategies. *War is War*’s aim is to denounce, to open the city’s wounds, to give visibility to the virtual clouds surrounding those impacting political-ritualistic actions performed on the city’s body. *Ações Cariocas*’ dramaturgical strategy is to refuse the logic of violence, to invest in relationality,
and to create performative assemblages with the city by investigating precariousness as objective tool and subjective paradigm. *Regurgitofagia* activates the theatrical machine in a radical, paradoxical way. It is an aesthetic and political experience about the spectator’s participation in an electric scene-not-scene and a reflection about the citizen’s participation in Rio’s charged context. *Pororoca* is the result of a strategic geographic dislocation in search of new interlocutors with important consequences for the company and for the city. One city, four artistic strategies, and two performative questions: what do we want art to be, or rather, what do we want art to move in our socio-political contexts? And, how do we make it?

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**Notes**


15 Ibid. p. 21.


17 See for instance http://michelmelamed.zip.net/

18 Interview with Shirley dos Santos at Casa de Cultura da Maré, Rio de Janeiro, January 2010.

19 Interview with Shirley dos Santos at Casa de Cultura da Maré, Rio de Janeiro, January 2010.

20 In The Politics of Aesthetics (London and New York: Continuum, 2004) Jacques Rancière articulates: “A distribution of the sensible establishes at one and the same time something common that is shared and exclusive parts. This apportionment of parts and positions is based on a distribution of spaces, times, and forms of activity that determines the very manner in which something in common lends itself to participation and in what way various individuals have a part in this distribution.” p. 12.


22 Ibid. p. 133.