

Looking for a methodology to analyze alterity in art

Em busca de uma metodologia para analisar a alteridade na arte

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this essay is to test other ways to formulate the notion of otherness by investigating its singularities in life forms and, above all, in artistic experiences that consider it as a state of creation. In art, difference does not always generate confrontation, but it establishes a crisis triggered by the estrangement of what is not the same and, thus, can lead to the emergence of new ways of creation.

Keywords: Art. Otherness. Body.

RESUMO

O objetivo deste ensaio é testar outros modos de formular a noção de alteridade, indagando as suas singularidades nas formas de vida e, sobretudo, nas experiências artísticas que a consideram um estado de criação. Isso porque, na arte, a diferença nem sempre gera confronto, mas instaura uma crise deflagrada pelo estranhamento daquilo que não é o mesmo e, assim, pode fazer emergirem novos caminhos de criação.

Palavras-chave: Arte. Alteridade. Corpo.

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The theme of otherness is not new, even so it may never have been so placed in evidence as in the last decade, with so many political confrontations and the massive presence of refugees. In other periods of crisis, some hypotheses were raised to destabilize the constitution of the binary *self and other*. However, there are few experiences that part from the body narratives crossing different levels of description and breaking with the dichotomies between nature and culture. That is the main topic of this essay: the construction of an epistemology that part from narratives not always explicit of the body in its relations with the environment.

At first, it may seem that my aim is to “explain” how the organism works from the connections between body, brain, and environment. However, although present some information in this respect, my main purpose is to investigate how the body (and particularly the artist body) deals with otherness from movement before constituting itself as a speech.

As will be explained in this article, there is no possibility of providing a narrative out of the mind-body-environment relationship. However, the discursive formulation tends often to dichotomize what was never restricted, in fact, the binary “self and the other,” especially in situations of confrontation. When understanding how this process works, it may be possible to admit that otherness is part of the flow of life and is not incarcerated in dichotomies. Some artistic experiences explain these movements and therefore constitute an important part of my argument, as will be presented at the end.

To develop these ideas, first, it is necessary to open the research for various knowledge networks. When creating an approximation, for example, between discussions proposed by neurologists and philosophers, we note that there are power devices that act deeply in the knowledge and beliefs about what we are, from what we recognize (or not) as the “other,” as well as in the creation of value judgments. Art has been fundamental in these contexts, in the extent that it can bodily simulate states of otherness, explaining how the connections between organic flows are constituted, the internalization of power devices and what is announced as the genesis of the movement/thinking.

My hypothesis is that, by making explicit these internal actions and the circumstances in which the flows are broken, we will be able to reflect more clearly on our way of life, choices, and the singularities of the processes of creation.

Somatic markers and maps of otherness

Every time the organism undergoes any disruption, it feels an unpleasant visceral sensation. As this is a body sensation, the

neurologist António Damásio attributed to this phenomenon the name *somatic state* (*soma* in greek means body). In addition, he noted that every corporal state “marks” an image or a stream of images as a kind of mapping that the brain does all the time mapping out what happens in the body. That is how Damásio came to the *somatic marker*, whose function would be to draw attention to the negative result of an action, as a kind of automatic alarm that announces a danger to the organism. When this happens, the body may immediately reject the uncomfortable situation or opt for other alternatives. It is important to note that these processes do not always happen consciously; thus, sometimes these somatic markers are not sufficient for a decision, which may require a reasoning to reach a final decision. Even in these situations, the markers are always present as a primary action of the body that characterizes an image, detects the disturbance and indicates paths.

We can consider, therefore, that the experience of otherness that deals with anything which is not the *same*, but *other state*, actuated by someone or something, any condition or different idea, is one of our main movement operators.

Damásio explains that the personal and social behavior happens along with the establishment of theories of the own minds and the minds of others. “Theory” in this context means a set of readings that the body (including the brain, but not restrict to it) makes of itself, environments, and possible shares. When marking the image of the difference, the body offers itself to change. Therefore, every theory already is, inevitably, an action.

This is also reflected in how the three stages of the self are organized. The first stage is called by Damásio as *protoself*, a type of neural description of stable aspects of the organism. The main product of these mappings that the brain makes of the body are the feelings of the living body, known as primordial feelings. In the second stage there is a pulse, through which this *Protoself* is modified by the organism’s interactions with other objects. These objects can literally be objects as we understand in the common sense (pen, chair, bag, cellphone, etc.) or any other sign, as a person, image, environment and so on. There is a narrative sequence of images that link these objects to the organism, through consistent standards that organize themselves all the time as maps. Both objects and organism contaminate each other, and these maps are a type of neural representation of the way the body is modified to represent objects during the very process of thinking. In the third stage, which Damásio calls *autobiographical self*, objects from the biography of an individual create new pulses linked, momentarily, to a consistent standard of wide-scale. It is a

state of creation of subjectivity, able for consciousness and formation of memories, handled by the imagination and reason.²

In addition to Damásio's research, there are other studies that also identified the processual quality of the "self." In philosophical terms, Gilbert Simondon was the one who explained that, instead of individuals, we all would be processes of individuation. Although he has trodden a path more to the study of the ontogeny of living beings, his hypotheses present similarities with Damásio's researches. According to Simondon, ancient Greeks knew the instability and stability, motion and rest, but lacked clarity in relation to what could be called *metastability*. In his view, the metastable state would admit the potential energy of a system and the increase of entropy. Thus, the process of individuation would be considered a metastable system, and the individual, more than a unit or identity, could be considered the result of an action that he calls *transduction*. This *transduction* would trigger a process by which the being is always deferred, and is constituted in the collective, in relation to what is disparate. Therefore, every system in metastable equilibrium can individuate itself, but will retain its potentialities and becomings. It will never be closed on itself, will always be discontinuous in what is the *other* (world, environment, people, objects, etc.).

Instead of *a priori* identities and a dichotomous notion of otherness, from Damásio and Simondon, the notions of self, individual, and identity become dynamic, porous, unfinished and deferred of a self given *a priori*, and are related to the need to rethink the collectives, avoiding the notion of people or homogeneous mass.

One of the authors who devoted himself to this theme was Paolo Virno (2015). To discuss the concept of multitude, Virno also used some hypotheses of Simondon and demonstrated how they broke with the widespread belief that the individual is something that predates the collective and, by being in a group, needs to get rid of some individual characteristics, as if in a collective the identity would dilute. To Virno, as well as to Simondon, would be the opposite. The collective would not be something that reduces or impairs the individuation, but its potency. Every individual would preserve (despite his/her will) a pre-individual level, a kind of unstructured fund that could generate new individuations. This is, once again, the recognition of a metastable instance in every process of individuation that defers the individual from what encloses him.

From this proposal, the individual would be translated as an individuated singularity, whose instance of the common would make him able to share the differences. Virno emphasized the political bias of this discussion when he wrote "A Grammar of the

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Jean-Pierre Changeux used to say that prefrontal cortex, where great part of these operations happen, could be considered a "generator of diversity," which in English suggests the curious acronym god, from the initials of generator of diversity.

Multitude” (2001), among other publications in which he questioned how it would be possible to feed the common sphere that only exists when it is collectively constituted. To do so, he created important bridges with Marxist thought, especially regarding the notions of general intellect (the collective and social dimension of intellectual work) and immaterial labor (the kind of work that generates processes, and not necessarily products). According to Virno, from there we could revitalize a *common processual*, where individual and collective instances would appear blurred all the time.

Gilles Deleuze was also part of this discussion, since he was the first to establish a rich connection between Simondon and Baruch Spinoza, formulating, from then on, the notion of *singularity*, that inspired authors such as Antonio Negri and Michael Hardt to conceive the difference between people and multitude. According to Negri and Hardt, multitude would be a collective of singularities and not a homogeneous mass, marked by a preconceived identity from parameters such as nationality, territory, and blood.

The singular life or “a life”, as Deleuze formulated in his last essay, would be marked by a vague specificity, becoming, never finished. Between the murmur of the newborn and of the one who is dying, the language would lose its omnipresence to a corporeal textuality that always existed but, in these borderline states, seemed to gain more visibility.

Although the way to conceptualize and produce terminologies is not the same between these authors, there is an instance of non-conclusion that marks the reading of what is constituted as the “self” from the bodies and environments. A kind of precariousness in life that does not necessarily tend to finitude, but above all to collectivization.

Surfing in flows

The Canadian researcher Brian Massumi (2014) points out that this transindividuality (a tacit collective instance) is present in all areas, including economy. His reading somewhat contradicts the widespread opinion that has identified with more emphasis narcissistic attitudes and immune processes that weaken the community life, strengthening competitiveness and all the harmful consequences that arise from the attempts to improve employability, even among those who supposedly should not be subservient to those power devices, such as artists.

On the opposite way of these analyses, Massumi identifies a plane of immanence, where economic system and subjects would be gathered in a functional state of indistinction between the

moment when the action starts and what is to come. He observes what will call *ontopower*, that would be “the power of becoming” and “the power of creation.” In this moment of *transduction*, to use the term of Simondon, the individual and the transindividual would walk together, constituting inevitable bridges between networks of affections and rationalities.

From this point of view, there would be a process to feed the economic systems that does not necessarily involve conscious decisions. The non-conscious level could also be considered non-personal (but transindividual). Therefore, the notion of *self* would be better defined as *movement* than *substance*. The flow of images would migrate in and out of the body, which would make the decisions something that occurs *through* us and not *in* us.

It is important to note that Virno, Massumi, Simondon, Damásio, and Deleuze refers to the constitution of the individual or “self” always in an instance necessarily collective and discontinuous, what not exempt the subjects of their responsibilities, as it might seem at first glance. It is just the recognition that there is no absolute control or a sovereign condition of individualization. Massumi even suggests the term “dividualism” which marks, particularly, the actions of microeconomics. It is in this micro instance that processes of perception become more and more significant. This happens because the politics of dividualism deals more with the intensities than satisfaction, creating crossed sensitivity scales. The choices are never completely individual, but on network. Massumi ventured to say that control of individual *surf in flows*.

I do not plan to extend the analysis of the hypotheses of these authors, but rather to draw attention to a question that haunts the debate: If there is an organic availability for anything which is not the same and if the very notion of “individual” is constituted from a network of relationships, what have blocking the flow, even regarding some artistic creation processes?

Territory markers and the operators of immunization

To understand what kind of devices break the metastable dynamics of life, I quote the Italian philosopher Giorgio Agamben, which in 2014 ended his studies on *homo sacer*, with the sixth volume of the series entitled *The use of bodies*. In the prologue he suggests that only when the mind can find a political element hidden in the underground of singular existence – beyond the division between public and private, politics and biography, *zoe* and *bios* – is it possible to draw the contours of a lifeform and a common use of the

bodies. This is the only way “will politics be able to escape from its muteness and individual biography from its idiocy” (Agamben, 2014, p. 22).

In the last twenty years, Agamben has called attention to invisible statements that act on the singular existence and its political actions. Many authors dedicated themselves to pursue these dark areas by suggesting differential diagnoses. According to Agamben, an important key is the notion of using the body. He does not refer to the own body, but the body that is other.

This theme appears in the *Politics* of Aristotle, when he analyzes the slave. The slave never belongs to himself. He is not able to produce anything, is only used in the practical sense, as we use clothes or a bed. The slave is not only property, but a part of the body of the master. The use of his own body makes him different from who manipulates him, as a tool that we use daily. Instead of using his own arm, hand, or leg, the master uses the slave in several ways, including sexually. In this sense, the use of this other body is always unproductive. It does not aim to produce a work or anything that is identifiable. It acts, but is not the author of nothing. What matters is its action as it happens. Its life is a naked life (*zoe*), situated in a zone of indistinction that dilutes what would be itself from the one that has the power.

Thus, the slave is only included in the scope of humanity by his own exclusion, as those who have neither life of their own nor political existence. In ancient Greece, there was no separation categorized between subject and object, since this dichotomy was created in Modernity. Hence, Agamben argues that it would not be appropriate, in this context, propose a relationship between master and slave, as if it were a subject and an object. It would be more appropriate to think of a mediation between two lives, and the life of the slave would be diluted in the life of the master by having no purpose and not be properly considered a person, but only a living being.

If we go back to Damásio and Simondon, we note that, cognitively, it was admitted that the body should never be seen as a noun unit, whose identity would be given *a priori*. It was also assumed that the notion of individual is phased, discontinuous, and off-center, and in all these findings there is the recognition of a collective instance in the individual and of a metastable singularity, more than an identity established *a priori*.

However, the dynamics of the use of the body raises other issues. There would be sometimes a continuity and a zone of indistinction between the body that has power and the one that hasn't. This connection produces nothing. The use of the other is not

configured as a perception of the difference that enables a change. If the individualities are phased and have a pre-individuality of becoming, in this case, the power relation uses the other's life as an indistinct tool of your own life. The slave cannot even be recognized as an independent object. He represents a mediation activated by the master, included and excluded of his life. Thus, what could be the mobilizing difference of new modes of individuation, or a pulse to proto and autobiographical narratives, is translated as a disabling mechanism for life. Instead of following the maps mapped by somatic markers and the generation of diversity, we note a marking of territories to defend the own life, by immunizing it from their foreign antigens. It is an attempt to privatize and stabilize standardization processes, eliminating everything that could represent any kind of difference and exteriority.

In this sense, Roberto Esposito (2011), other Italian philosopher, say that the immunity is one of the main paradigms we face today. In his book *Immunitas*, the "other" would just be a small dose of venom internalized to immunize us from the collective, following the logic of the vaccine that includes to exclude.

It is possible to defer the lives of these power devices through art?

What differentiates the artistic experiences is that the action of somatic markers goes beyond the activation of motion because it is no longer an action accustomed and invisible. It becomes the primary action of creation and destabilizes the relationship between *one and the other*, because neither are given *a priori*. They are procedural, metastables, dynamics, and systemics.

However, as well as organic plasticity is camouflaged and intercepted by power devices as in the relationship between master and slave, there are also changes in the processes of creation, which are often transformed into creative strategies subservient to the power devices generated by the political-economic contexts.

What has affected artists all over the world is the difference in time between entertainment creative strategies and processes of creation, as discusses Pascal Gielen (2015). By compromising the time of creation, it turns into mere exhibition. In addition, I dare say that there is also another problem: the creative strategies (which are not constituted as creation) deal with the same and not with what could destabilize actual standards (certainties, movements, narratives, and so on).

Maybe this is the crossroad to be faced, not just for artists but for all activities dealing with production of knowledge. How to believe and activate change processes?

Massumi claims that it makes part of Neoliberalism a certain type of movement that dies because of your own success. Therefore, the micropolitical success is often the macropolitical failure, what necessarily calls for the reinvention of collectives. If immune processes damage the agreements, on the other hand, there is an aesthetic dimension of life that insists, producing a network of possibilities.

Maybe we can think the same in relation to art. There is a macro artistic production, in line with market expectations and with everything which is already familiar and prone to a good receptivity. But at the same time, there is a micro artistic production, susceptible to destabilization, risk, and everything that tends to be failure – neither one nor the other, but the denial of this same dichotomy.

In this sense, political manifestations that have brought body confrontation in the streets are not similar to the processes of artistic creation. The difference is, precisely, to understand the difference. In the case of protests, the dichotomy and the identities given *a priori* are the starting point, which, for its turn, ends up generating the denial or exclusion of the other, as if the only way to survive was to adhere to the logic of immunization. However, the processes of artistic creation (regarding micro-production) are fed by the otherness, to strengthen the ability to destabilize the dichotomy and activate the systemic crisis that constitutes them. It is not a question of one or the other, but to clarify the discontinuity and feed the transindividuality that does not generate a stagnant identity.

Artistic creation is not committed to promoting social or political changes. However, by giving visibility to crisis states, it presents questions not always visible in everyday life. Thus, connections that can destabilize habits and beliefs and point out possibilities are established. In this sense, the state of otherness can be translated as a state of creation. Two examples of this are the involuntary Nomadism and states of exception. Both are ambiguous. On the one hand, they seem to immobilize all processes, but on the other, as suggested by the Brazilian philosopher Vladimir Safatle (2015), is the helpless body that has nothing to lose. It is the one that can act politically.

For Safatle, as well as for Butler and Athanasiou (2013), helplessness creates bonds by dispossession. It dispossesses the subject of predicates that identified itself. A political body produced by helplessness is a body in continuous dispossession and des-identification of its determinations. That is how helplessness produces errant bodies that may generate changes.

In this sense, the artistic experience could be considered a procedure of cognitive helplessness that, instead of disidentifying oneself and others, it is affirmed in the common life.

In a way, that is what we experienced between the decades of 1960 and 1970 with so many artistic events mobilized by the need to politicize life, form communities and networks of resistance. During those decades, began to appear in Brazil the first experiments that pointed to the contemporary arts, seeking to be constituted from practices and not models given *a priori*. Considering the political situation of that time, marked by the military regime, there was no financial support for the arts, much less for demonstrations that could, even vaguely, be considered subversive. Thus, disidentify oneself could be interpreted as acting collectively against an extreme situation. Change eating habits, religious belief, use drugs, test new training would be strategies to establish other body, able to act (or decided not to act) and thus change.

Immersed in the second decade of the new millennium, we face many of the power devices highlighted throughout this text. Yet it cannot be said that there is, in fact, a market for body art in Brazil, though support tools have been created. It turns out that some of these tools have been shown to be perverse by imposing short deadlines for creation and requiring quantifiable results, feeding the competitiveness and making fragile the formation of communities, as they are always discontinued, without being part of a cultural policy.

Maybe the processes that can escape of it are those who feed a micropolitics of actions, opting to be exposed to the strangeness that mobilizes and somatically marks the difference.

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