

Attempts to capture the sensitive nuances: the photoperformance and the face-to-face arts

Tentativas de capturar o sensível:
a fotoperformance e as artes presenciais

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ABSTRACT

This study seeks to reflect on the ways of capturing the poetic action of the actor-performer through photoperformance records. Used mainly in practices by artists from the visual arts, this type of material is a powerful device for comprehension of the creative act in the face-to-face arts. In this analysis, two poetic actions performed in the landscape during the practical immersion of a master's research will be on focus, as a possibility of highlighting the specificity of this type of record.

Keywords: Actor-performer. Photoperformance. Face-to-face arts.

RESUMO

Esse estudo procura refletir sobre os modos de captura da ação poética do ator-performer a partir de registros de fotoperformance. Utilizado, sobretudo, em práticas de artistas das artes visuais, esse tipo de material se apresenta como potente dispositivo de compreensão do ato criativo nas artes presenciais. Nessa análise, serão focalizadas duas ações poéticas realizadas na paisagem durante a imersão prática de uma pesquisa de mestrado, como possibilidade de evidenciar a especificidade desse tipo de registro.

Palavras-chave: Ator-performer. Fotoperformance. Artes Presenciais.

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In the winter of 2016, I sought other spaces to be. Until then, in my trajectory as an artist several experiences conducted in the Italian stage complement each other, sometimes acting, sometimes directing stage shows. This comfortable space, of determined walls and ceilings, little oscillating temperatures and luminosities, made room for change of landscape. This experience, lived for twelve days in the last remnants of the Atlantic forest of the interior of Parana and another ten days at the coast of Santa Catarina, was the practical immersion of my master's research. In this research, I set myself the sensorial experience in other spaces, starting from one of the Neo-Concrete movement², when the pieces of art went out of the galleries. The objective was, from the environmental logic of these changing spaces, the occurrence of a poetic construction of possible materials that, without a hearing, could be registered to compose the research.

With a camera and a camera tripod, I arrived at these spaces each morning and went out of them only at the end of the afternoon. In the areas visited, there was no one but me. The spaces were chosen exactly because of this empty quality, so that the life observed there, in its many sounds and silences, was lived close to the most natural aspects of these landscapes.

Outside, in the landscape, the world breathes in a different way and the relationship with the spatiality differs in many aspects from that experienced in the rehearsal room and in the Italian stage. There is no time for the anxieties that accelerate our actions, and providing our senses with extra doses of sensorialities is necessary, as a perceptive reeducation. However, it is necessary to understand this sensoriality in a distinct way from the romantic way of feeling – beautiful and continuously appropriate for this reason. On the contrary, the natural environments, as living spaces, are ever changing and almost always deprogramming the actor-performer.

Based on the concept of performative programme³, presented by the researcher and performer Eleonora Fabião, I sought to organize these creations in which the malleability of any preconceptions would be extremely necessary for a composition that was beside the landscape and that did not rise as an imposition for my part. This way of working by Fabião arouse to this trajectory as a way to differentiate the improvisations of the experiences to be performed in these places. Thus, I never improvised on the landscape, but programmed, reprogrammed and then acted the actions that were born from the hearing of these environments. On this difference, Fabião comments:

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Based on the phenomenological philosophy by Merleau Ponty, the Neo-Concretism was a Brazilian artistic movement that sought to recover the human aspects and the rehabilitate the sensitive nuances as fundamentals of the real knowledge. So the introduction of new experience forms with the piece of art gained the status of a living organism or a *quasi-corpus*, “whose reality does not end in the external relations of its elements [...] which only truly occurs in the direct, phenomenological approach” (BRITO, 1999, p. 10).

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For Eleonora Fabião, program is “the utterance of the performance: a set of actions previously stipulated, clearly articulated and conceptually polished to be performed by the artist, by the public or by both without previous rehearsal. That is, the temporality of the program is very different from that of the spectacle, of the rehearsal, of the improvisation, of the choreography. [...] This program/utterance allows, guides and moves the trial” (FABIÃO, 2013, p. 4).

The performer do not improvise an idea: he creates a program and program himself to do it (even when his program is to pay someone to perform actions designed for him or invite viewers to activate his propositions). By acting his program, he deprograms organism and channel (FABIÃO, 2008, p. 237).

This permeable quality, which allows an action transformation, served, in this work, as one of the main ways of surrendering to the environment in the search for a refined hearing. Although the program is an organization of the actions to be carried out during the performance, paralysis are not welcome; oppositely, we must surrender to the transformations given by the space at the moment they happen.

In the landscape, walls and even ceilings don't exist, and the unpredictable emerges as a food that keeps a state of constant attention by the actor-performer. When programming, leaving empty spaces to be completed by the action of time is necessary, which is another factor that gives a new meaning to the logics of the contact, transforming them.

In the vast area of thin sand, in Florianópolis, SC, Brazil, with a scale that always disarranged me, I sought some corners for a more compartmentalized exploration at times. With a scarcer vegetation that only punctuated the surroundings, the main work material was the sand in its monochromatism. When I faced this action of seeking certain rooms of this immense habitation, a photoperformance series that turned out to be a human involuntary reaction of an ordinary continuous need for demarcating territories, comforting our own inner, was born over the days. A few kilometers from there, the city surrounded by the sea is the victim of a constant real state speculation that seizes the largest number of natural area possible, making the territory restrict to a few people who can live there.

Based on these reflections and on the finding of empty places in that immensity of land, I started demarking my exclusive space, my "Private condominium", – name given to the series – an intruder space into that area. The action was to construct a quadrilateral space, unrelated to this space, made of restriction ribbon – or zebra marking tape – so well known in the daily life of the cities for their black and yellow colors and for delimiting many types of obstruction of a normal organization of space: in civil constructions and traffic accidents, for example, in which, for security reasons, strangers are prohibited to enter. These ribbons denote any kind of isolation, from "stay away", distant, to "caution, do not touch the surrounded area".

Alone, I start creating every moment of the action, recording it in photographs. The intention was to create a space with a different atmosphere from that of the outside of the ribbon, a segregation of areas in which, as a representation of the occupation, I put myself in its interior, taking possession of that territory. In the sequence of images, I tied myself with the same restriction ribbons as a retrograde symptom: occupying and being self-occupied as a consequence of becoming life less collective and more private.



Privativo I, 2016.
Florianópolis/
SC. Personal
collection.



Privativo II, 2016.
Florianópolis/
SC. Personal
collection.

This territorial demarcation, like a trail of power left in the sand, ended by the action of time itself. After taking the pictures in this space, I left the restriction ribbons under the action of wind, which became increasingly stronger as the afternoon came on. On the ground, I saw these barriers destroyed by that natural activity; another sign of the tension between man and nature, of a misappropriation of spaces that breathe in another rhythm.

Looking at the action itself and observing its destruction under the action of time, I woke up to a different perception level. For being all the time in the search for a tactile look that unfold in other

sensibilities, I redirected the action itself. It no longer delimited itself in its own moment, but its trails became one more poetic layer of the act of doing, through the conditions inherent to the change of natural spaces. The photoperformance had already ended, but the uninterrupted happening inscribed by the action of the elements expanded the field of the action itself and the marks of the wind were equivalent to my gesture and to my presence recorded in the picture. This mutant aspect bestowed upon these specific spaces is one of the points that sharpens the attention of the actor-performer. The natural instability of this environment is constantly destabilizing the action and the programs, making the whole process a state of pulsating life. Thus, there is no room for constancy, but, as mentioned, a constant self-deprogramming to read the instant defined by the inconstancy of the elements. The actor-performer must always “listen again” to turn his own action into a poetic action.

When paying attention to these changes occurred in the landscape throughout the day, I could perform another photoperformance series. “Zelo” (Care) arose from the intense action of the wind, at the sunset, which cast several natural materials from that region far away. From the sand, previously buried pieces of twigs, small stones, shells, leaves were revealed. After observing this natural activity that brought new elements to the white sand, I started intercepting and separating them. Among these elements, I set aside only a few twigs of different sizes and, beside them, I searched for actions that branched from the word “care”. From this starting point, I came to the actions: to lullaby, to protect, to revere, to embrace, to support, to shelter, to guard, to take care, etc., used for the construction of the images. With the actions listed, I started relating to the elements in an attempt to make each intent become objective, so that I could bring a poetic discourse that related to each care to be given to the materials to the moment of the photographic capture.



Zelo I, 2016 -
Florianópolis/
SC - Personal
collection.

Capture of the sensitive nuances

Besides being outside in an attempt to understand other relational possibilities, I could try other ways to capture the moment. Before performing these immersions, I wondered just how powerful these records should be to build bridges in its interaction with the reader of the research and the viewer of the images. Thus, I sought to turn these photography shots not into mere abstractions for becoming documents in a research, but into poetic moments of these experiences.

In the design of the aforementioned actions, the photo was an important discursive apparatus, once each action was programmed and directed to the camera capture. This way, according to Auslander (2006, p. 2), the space of the document (either visual or audiovisual), became the only space in which the performance took place. Therefore, I did not have an audience at any time, and the contact with the viewer occurs through the photographic record as a visual offshoot of the action.

So, the photoperformance was not done as a possibility of action capture in which record has only utilitarian and documental function; the image production appears as an artistic support of a discursive autonomy, once the action is thought for this particular purpose.

Among the most frequent ways of doing a photoperformance are montage, collage and *mise-en-scène*. As an actor-performer and, given the specific nature of this research, the third way was privileged in my incursions. In this type of record, the performer places himself directly to the camera to perform an expressive and visually powerful image, qualities to be found in the uniqueness of the image (VINHOSA, 2014, p. 2883). The objective is to create a photography that falls within the concept defined by Walter Benjamin (1987) as tactile image: image capable of causing immediate physical and mental reactions.

Faced with the performative action fugacity, becoming the process documentary records into poetic creations was one of the biggest challenges of this investigation. About the difficulty in capturing and documenting the scenic action, Erika Fischer-Lichte comments about the transience of this phenomenon that runs out on its own currentness. On the other hand, the author argues that this kind of documentation is a condition that allows to talk about the action itself after its completion, disagreeing with Peggy Phelan that, in turn, believes any attempt to capture the scenic action via video or picture is doomed to failure (FISCHER-LICHTE, 2011, p. 156). I am not talking, here, in documenting the action,

as Fischer-Lichte did, but to have it and capture it in its most sensitive parts, noting his compositional parts: a dramaturgy of/in the image.

This tension between document and action accompanies the historical trajectory of the performance and, even before it, the happening, given the transient nature of the actions that are projected in different spaces and times. On this issue, Vinhosa adds:

Since it was born, in 1970, it was intrinsic and problematically linked to the photographic record, keeping an ambiguous relationship and conflict that ranged from chronic dependency to casual autonomy. It is common to listen to artists that practiced and still practice it, the claim of the action as a single and isolated legitimate event, being the record, however, indispensable for its future circulation, memory and transmission (VINHOSA, 2014, p. 2880).

For accessing the performative actions in more comprehensive artistic circuits, considering art magazines, exhibition halls and festivals that show this language, the performers found themselves faced with new devices that captured the power of the actions converted into movement, drama and narratives that turned the documents into exhibition materials (VINHOSA, 2014, p. 2880). An example of this type of record, inaugurating the Earth-body-art in the late 1960s, are the works by the Cuban artist Ana Mendieta⁴ who, immersed in the landscape, transformed its performative actions into photographic sequences and video performances densely loaded with poetry. More recently, and by the specific action carried out in the landscape, the Brazilian artist Rodrigo Braga also used these devices to register his work. The actions *Comunhão*, 2006, and *Desejo Eremita*, 2009, are some examples⁵.

Being in front of the camera to record an action was something completely new in my artistic career. Until then, the images of my works were photographs taken during the scene in performances held in the Italian stage or on the street. With this novelty, giving life to an action that, for digital or printed image, was filled with intention appeared as another challenge for this immersion. How to find in the desired action a moment that, psychophysically, could be captured by the objective lens? Moreover, how to differentiate this moment from a photography pose? In the gap between these two issues, or rather, these two ways of exposing yourself to the camera, I could realize that the probable answer could be found in the intensity in which the performance is conducted. Thus, the camera, very close to me or very distant from me, was my lonely viewer able to see each detail of this instant in it I delivered myself to it. This way, the vectors

4. The Cuban performer Ana Mendieta (1948-1985) is considered one of the precursors of the Earth-body-art, artistic language that emerged as a sort of counterpoint to the Land-Art in the '70s. Faced with the actions of the artist, the performer put his own presence in the poetic images – photo and video performance – in a relationship of profound interaction with the natural environment. In its trajectory, the relationship with a search for territorial identity is reflected in its actions. When she was still 12, she and her sister were just some of the thousands of children who were sent to USA by the known Operation Peter Pan, led by the Catholic Church and the American government in order to “save them” from Fidel Castro’s regime. Her artistic career, inside and outside the galleries, shows the Earth as main elemental: as a symbolical element or as a matter in which the female body rests.

5. To see these and other actions of the artist, access: <http://rodrigobraga.com.br/>

of my body, each detail of all its extension could be captured and processed in this intensity.

In my technical training as an actor, the concept of *punctum*⁶, by Roland Barthes, always has been present as a way of exercising a keener eye while performing actions. According to the author, the *punctum* would be that point in the photograph that draws the attention of the person who looks at it, a kind of light that was supposed to emanate in certain corners of the image that, highlighted by their details, put itself on the center and sensitize the viewer. A very classical example to understand this concept and sharpen one's eye for details is the image of the painting Christ among the doctors (1506), by the Renaissance painter Albrecht Dürer. In this painting, full of grotesque old men, the hands of the individuals draw the attention, as a metonymic gesture by the painter to bring these peripheral members into focus.

For manifestation of the poetic aspect to be noticed within the action frozen in the picture, I start building each moment attentive to details that could transform these *punctums*, all the time being faced with this little gap that would probably separate the capture of the sensitive nuances from that of the apparent images and a photographic pose from an action captured.

The experience in front of the camera was one of the biggest challenges of this journey, given the difficulty in capturing and materializing sensitive aspects in each moment: the level of attention given to this record is what could differentiate it from a documentary material of the processes that would only serve to research. As an actor-performer, I need to have a polyhedral eye to each detail of the action, to the space, to the care for the elements, and to my own way to look the camera, a multiple exercise of presence that makes me an editor and agent in this instant.

By the photoperformance, another research field arises for the actor-performer. In a world increasingly digital and saturated with images, how to apprehend a poetic action in a single frame in a sensitive manner? Although the technological apparatus in its multiple resources, filters and post-captures are in favor of the construction of an ideal and beautiful image, the challenge for a artistic and potentially emotional research, as already mentioned, resides in sharpening the details. I believe the transformation of the very act of capturing into a experience for viewers is between these details, an experience in which the camera in front of the action not only record, but also apprehend the moment in which the living relationship between actor-performer and the space occurs.

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For more details on the concept of *punctum*, see BARTHES, Roland. *A Câmara Clara*. Rio de Janeiro: Nova Fronteira, 1984.

Therefore, this resource still little-used among scenic artists, can become a strong apparatus for dramaturgical capture of the image, when the sensitive aspect flows from the action and sensitize.

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