
Childhood and contemporary theatre: the rights of children in the context of art and culture

*Infância e cena contemporânea: os direitos das crianças no contexto da arte e
da cultura*

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Abstract

This paper discusses the human rights of children in the context of artistic experimentation. Through the analysis of performances and spectacles that challenge conservative conceptions of childhood, this paper discusses aesthetic, ethical, and political issues concerning the participation of children in artistic experiences in the contemporary scene. Especially within the last two years, this conservatism has led to censorship attempts, as well as attacks on artists and works of art in Brazil and throughout the world.

Keywords: Performing arts and human rights. Childhood. Contemporary theatre.

Resumo

Este artigo propõe uma reflexão sobre os direitos da criança no contexto da experimentação artística. O trabalho discute questões estéticas, éticas e políticas acerca da participação de crianças na cena contemporânea por meio da análise de performances e espetáculos que colocam em xeque concepções conservadoras de infância que, principalmente nos últimos dois anos, vem respaldando condutas de censura e ataques à artistas e obras no Brasil e no mundo.

Palavras-chave: Cena contemporânea. Infância. Direitos da criança.

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Childhood without a body

On September 2017, the artist Wagner Schwartz presented his performance titled “La Bête” at the São Paulo Museum of Modern Art. Inspired by the work of the Brazilian visual artist Lygia Clark titled “*Bicho*” (“beast” in Portuguese), in “*La bête*” (“beast” in French), Schwartz lets his own naked body be manipulated as if it were one of Clark's geometric figures. On the same day that “*La bête*” was presented at the museum, a performance video recording was posted online and it was shown several times by major media in the following days. The video shows the moment when a little girl follows her mother, and as many spectators had done before, touches the artist's foot and arm. Out of context, the scene mistakenly gave many people the impression that the child was being subjected to violence. It caused a national commotion across the country. The artist and the child's mother were strongly attacked by conservative groups and far-right politicians. The repercussions of this event included virtual lynching, threats, violent protests, interrogations, the opening of a pedophilia investigation by the District Attorney of São Paulo, and even physical assault of museum staff. Unfortunately, what happened in the São Paulo Museum of Modern Art is not an isolated case. In the last years, especially since the last presidential election in 2018, it is evident that children have been at the center of the symbolical, conceptual, and political disputes in Brazil.

Analyzing the repercussions of this event in the article “The invention of childhood without body,” published in the newspaper *El País* in March 2018, the Brazilian writer Eliane Brum concludes that “the current society strives to erase the fact that the child has a body.” For Brum, it stems from cultural constructions that erase the body from the conceptions of childhood and conceive the child as a being living in a world separate from the adult world.

In the name of “protecting children,” not only artists, but institutions, authors, school subjects, teachers, and professors have all become targets of attacks. As it has happened in other historical moments in Brazil and in the world, conservative groups, using authoritative means, try to impose not only their own current and future projects, but also the way in which history, including the most recent past, is told.

These conservative groups have constantly been trying, among other things, to suppress elementary and high school discussions² based on the subject of diversity and what has come to be known as “identity politics.” In recent years, identity politics has been fundamental in Brazil not only to increase the discussions about racism, sexism, homophobia, classism, and the intersections between them, but also to stimulate many actions to redress historical injustices. Thanks to identity politics, the importance of minority groups to speak for and represent themselves in political and social contexts has been brought to light.

However, from the point of view of the current conservative groups, what is at stake regarding childhood, is who will take over the education of children, and through them, implement desired future projects. The childhood vision that emerges from these disputes, unfortunately, is that of the child who must be trained to absorb and follow what has been decided by adults. Thus, once again in history, the opportunity to listen to children is lost. According to research from childhood sociologists, such as Manuel Jacinto Sarmiento, children today are still among the groups that are silenced and prevented from participating in decision-making that directly affects their interests.

Remarkably, recent examples of such disputes in the national congress, include the conservative groups’ recent attacks on and the interdiction of the material “Brazil without homophobia,” produced by the Ministry of Education in 2008, and disparagingly dubbed “gay kit,” which was banned by conservative congress members before arriving in schools.

In 2018, at a seminar called “Museums, Childhood and the Freedom of expression,” held at the São Paulo Museum of Modern Art to discuss the rights of children and adolescents in enjoying and participating in cultural and artistic exhibits, such issues were on the agenda of the group, which consisted of professionals including lawyers, therapists, teachers, and artists. For Raul Araújo³, director of *IBDCRIA*, the Brazilian Institute of Child and Adolescent

² The government of the current president Jair Bolsonaro has been presenting proposals, such as the project that regulates home education and the announcement of the contingency of resources for education (not only contingency to higher education funds, as initially announced, but also to primary education), which would endanger the maintenance of Brazil’s own public schools.

³ In a conference held at the “*Museums, Childhood and Freedom of Expression*” Seminar, at the Museum of Modern Art in São Paulo, October 2018.

Law, the ban on discussions about gender and sex education in schools hinders the right of children and adolescents to access information about diversity and sexuality. According to Araújo, “gender ideology”⁴ is a term that was coined by the conservative branch of the Catholic Church and spread by Joseph Ratzinger, Pope Benedict XVI, to curb discussions of sexuality triggered by major HIV epidemics, as well as sexual abuse of children and adolescents by priests and bishops by the institution itself.

Since then, the term “gender ideology” has been widely used by the church as an evil to be fought because, according to them, the traditional family is being threatened. Thus, with the spread of these narratives, children and adolescents have become the main targets of political disputes between conservatives and progressives. The events that took place in 2017, such as the attacks on the São Paulo Museum of Modern Art and the artist Wagner Schwartz, the closing of the *QUEERMUSEUM: Cartographies of Difference in Brazilian Art* exhibition by *Santander Cultural Center* in Porto Alegre after defamatory actions promoted by the Free Brazil Movement (*MBL*), and the self-censorship of the São Paulo Museum of Art (*MASP*) that prohibited people under 18 years of age from entering the History of Sexuality exhibit (this censorship was retracted and accompanied minors were allowed) are all examples of the unfolding of widespread propagation of these narratives in the mass media, churches, and social networks.

Article 277 in the Federal Constitution enacted in 1988 established that “it is the responsibility of the family, society, and state to assure with absolute priority that children, adolescents, and young adults have the right to life, health, food, education, recreation, professionalization, culture, dignity, respect, liberty, and family, and community life, aside from keeping them safe from all forms of neglect, discrimination, exploitation, violence, cruelty and oppression” (BRASIL, 1988). Pedro Hartung, lawyer and program coordinator for the Absolute Priority program (Programa Prioridade Absoluta) from the Alana Institute, draws attention to two issues in the text. The first issue is that the text places the interests and rights

⁴ According to Santa Catarina State University researcher Jimena Furlani, the term was first used in 1998 at the Episcopal Conference of the Catholic Church held in Peru, whose theme was “*Gender Ideology - Its Dangers and Extents*”.

of the children and adolescents initially by the words “absolute priority,” and “in no other place [of the Constitution] is there such a strong word junction.”⁵ The second is the issue of co-responsibility: the article “makes it clear that the care and guaranteed protection of these individuals is a shared responsibility. It is not solely the family, it is not solely the state, and it not not solely society, in other words, it is all of us at the same time, each one executing their roles.”⁶

With the emergence of development theories in the fields of education, psychology, and medicine, according to Hartung, new perspectives and conceptions of childhood were outlined. By bringing the notion that the environment in which the child is raised influences their development as much as their genetic inheritance, these studies produced direct implications on public policies to guarantee a healthy and dignified childhood for all children. Hence a fundamental question arises: how do we democratically determine what is in the best interest of children?

Hartung argues that it is possible to harmonize the fundamental rights of children to participation and protection: “they are not always in conflict.”⁷ One of the mechanisms for this, for example, is the indicative classification policy which started in 2005 through a broad debate led by the Ministry of Justice, with the objective of discussing ways of harmonizing the best interest of children (their fundamental rights) and freedom of expression.

Despite the many mechanisms already created to defend children’s rights, such as the Child and Adolescent Statute (1990), the International Treaty (1989), article 277 of the Brazilian Constitution (1988), and more recently, the Early Childhood Legal Framework (2016), a study conducted by *Datafolha* in 2013 demonstrates that 81% of the Brazilian population are not aware of the directives established by such documents. The unfamiliarity of these laws generates behaviors that end up violating children’s rights in the name of their

⁵In a conference held at the Seminar “Museums, Childhood and Freedom of Expression”, held at MAM in São Paulo, in October 2018.

⁶Id., 2018.

⁷Id., 2018.

protection, like in the case of the video released of the performance at MAM in 2017. At that the time, the Public Ministry of São Paulo pointed out that the image rights of the child were violated, in other words, the right of not being exposed on social media. Because of this, MAM and the Public Ministry signed a Conduct Adjustment Term, in which, among other measures, it pledged to implement “actions that restrict the use of cellphones, cameras, and video recording devices in installations that involve interactions between the public and human beings that are part of the work” with the objective of “protecting children and adolescents from undue exposure.”⁸ It is important to emphasize that MAM did not suffer rebuke from the Public Ministry because of the participation of the child that contained nudity, which is in fact not illegal, but rather for not having prevented the video and consequently the exposure of the child in the media.

Therefore, discussions surrounding the wellbeing and safety of children in their roles in art and culture in society are absolutely necessary. The attacks on works of art and artists, and the attempts at censorship in the name of child protection, on the other hand, often incite violent and even criminal behavior, cease any type of discussion, and try to impose on society a single concept of childhood: a childhood without a body or voice. Guaranteeing children’s rights to participate in art is fundamental as a means to preserve time and space where they can freely live an embodied childhood and exercise freedom of expression.

For an embodied childhood: the child in the contemporary scene

In the last five years I have been investigating the ethical implications, aesthetics, and policies concerning the presence of children in the contemporary art scene. A few of the artistic experiences that I analyzed during this period, challenged the social processes of invisibilities of children’s bodies described by Eliane Brum in the previously cited article.

⁸ Source: Official page of the Public Ministry of São Paulo. Available in: <http://www.mpsp.mp.br/portal/page/portal/noticias/noticia?id_noticia=17879933&id_grupo=118>.

Due to their peculiar approaches and partnerships with children, experiences of artists like Catherine Dastè (France), Peter Brook (England), Bob Wilson (USA), Oficina Uzina Uzona (Brazil), Rimini Protokoll (Germany), Romeo Castellucci (Italy) and Gob Squad (Germany), stimulate reflections about the present relationship between art and childhood.

In the 60's, Catherine Dasté created the first *Centre Dramatique National pour l'Enfance et la Jeunesse* of France at *Théâtre de Sartrouville* and directed plays conceived from stories entirely created by children and collected through her method of "active listening" (DASTÉ, 1978). Peter Brook recognizes a quality in children that is fundamental for the actor: the capacity to naturally and freely transition between the everyday world and imagination (CROYDEN, 2009). In the book *The Open Door*, Brook mentions the "important tradition" of performing their plays, still in progress, to a group of children. Brook (1999), was in search of a sincere audience that was also capable of revealing "the antics of boredom," and found that "there is no better criteria [...]": children do not have any preconceived notions, they become interested immediately or they get bored on the spot, and when they are not engaged with the actors they become impatient" (BROOK, 2000, p. 30).

The American director Bob Wilson established partnerships with children with physical and behavioral difficulties, especially the young artists Raymond Andrews and Christopher Knowles. Wilson recognizes that, through his relationship with the two young artists, he was able to perceive things in new ways. These partnerships were extremely key in developing his work. The scenic procedures that came out of the partnerships with Andrews in 1967, like discontinuity, the obvious lack of logic, the multiplicity of sounds and shapes, and the absence of the word, profoundly influenced all of his later work (TONEZZI, 2011).

Presently, in his artist training center *The Watermill Center*, Wilson provides an extensive program, coordinated by the artist Andrea Cote, that stimulates partnerships between children and artists from all around the world.

In the German group Rimini Protokoll, children and adolescents take on the protagonist in *Shooting Bourback* (2003), *Airport Kids* (2008), and *Do's & Don'ts* (2018) like *experts of the everyday*, terms with which the group decides the professional performers that act in the plays. According to Daniel Wetzell, the *experts of the everyday* are invited to the plays because

they know what the group is interested in a specific way of perceiving the world (BOENISCH, 2008). In 2011, the German Gob Squad, that describes itself as a group of artists that work with performance and video, accepted the challenge from Dirk Pauwels, director of *Campo Arts Center* (Belgium), to produce the third play of a trilogy composed of works created from artistic partnerships between artists and children. The goal, given to the group by Pauwel, was explicit: put on a show, purely for artistic reasons, in which the children are treated as professional performers and in which pedagogical aspects were not considered. The show *Before Your Very Eyes!* was put together by a group in Belgium in 2011, and in the United States in 2015, with children ranging from 8 to 14 years old from their respective countries.

The non-pedagogical approach present in the God Squad experience also influences other scenic experiences in Germany. The important experimental play *Ruhrtriennale* from 2012-2014, for example, worked with the idea of *non-educational* works that involve children and adolescents as performers or spectators.

The relationship of the Italian company *Societas Raffaello Sanzio* with childhood, appeared as one of the main issues of my doctorate research.⁹ According to the founders, Romeo Castellucci, Chiara Guidi, and Claudia Castellucci¹⁰, the attention to childhood reflects the interest of the company in the “childhood of the theatre,” or in the pre-tragic theatre, that is, a theatre not dominated by words. In Raffaello Sanzio’s work, this interest has a practical characteristic that solidifies itself in the search of procedures that enables the completion of a play that reaches the spectator through their senses. The voice is conceived as a sound and as *action*, and therefore, it does not have the function of communicating through the meaning of words, but rather reaches the spectator with sensorial and physical impact.

⁹ The thesis “Ceci n'est pas un acteur: Body, perception and experience in the scene and in the pedagogy of Societas Raffaello Sanzio” was realized in the Theater Graduate Program at UDESC between 2010 and 2014, with CAPES scholarship and published under the title *This is not an actor: The Theater of Societas Raffaello Sanzio* (2016).

¹⁰ Founding members of the Italian theatrical company Societas Raffaello Sanzio created in 1981.

With children present on stage (a constant in the company's shows), as well as anorexic, amputee, obese, and elderly, Romeo Castellucci seeks to question the representational dimension within representation. The director of *Societas Raffaello Sanzio* plays, constantly and consciously, with what the German researcher Erika Fischer Lichte (2008) calls "perceptual multistability of the spectator". The senses and meanings of the presences on stage are generated from the continual oscillation between the materiality of the performers' bodies and their characters.

Because the company does not have a fixed core group of actors, the people who perform in the shows are chosen by Castellucci for their psychophysics to "be on scene" not only to interpret or represent a character. This process is called by Castellucci "objectively or literally choice".

The children in the *Societas Raffaello Sanzio* and Romeo Castellucci spectacles, for French researcher Maude Lafrance, "would be the one by whom the theatre collapses and fades to give way to an exploration in the material of reality. The one who embodies the rejection of theatrical illusion." (LAFRANCE, 2012, p. 9). For her, to put a child on stage would be to bring in an authenticity that engages the theater in the way to experience the real.

The presence of children in *On the Concept of Face, Regarding the son of God* has aroused the anger of Catholic fundamentalists and right-wing extremist groups since its debut in 2010. The last episode against the Castellucci performance happened in April 2018 when the show was censured in France. The mayor of Sarthe refused to authorize the paid employment of nine minors. The order, according to the mayor, "does not intend to prohibit the scene, it only aims to preserve the children who should have participated" (LE MAINE LIBRE, 2018). The interference with the work had repercussions in Europe and generated protests by artists and the French Culture Minister Françoise Nyssen, repudiating the censorship attempt. In an open letter to the mayor, Castellucci says that this is one of the most beautiful and richest aspects of this work: "affording time to discuss important issues with children, listen to their voices, criticize violence through the paradoxical use of their fiction, and share with them a discourse on art, culture, and human fragility. To talk about ethics, finally" (CASTELLUCCI in CAPRON, 2018).

The association between the notion of pedagogy and the artistic practices produced with children in the environment of *Societas* (which aside from participation in adult plays, includes theatre for children, theatre schools, and festivals) is refuted by Guidi and Castellucci because, according to them, there is no concern in *strictu sensu* with educational aspects, there are no specific objectives linked to the teaching of theatre, training, or to the thought of methodologies of theatre teachings. Their practices are centered around offering children an experience of art of a non-pedagogical nature - or reverse pedagogy (*rovesciata* pedagogy) - once they are adult artists who seek to learn with children and childhood.

In Brazil, it is also possible to identify peculiar experiences of childhood approach, like the group *Teatro de Vertigem* that places the girl Aline Arantes as the child character in two scenes of *Apocalypse 1, 11*, a show that contained nudity, sex, and violence. When placing the girl to play the child, the group works in a framework really similar to that of Rimini Protokoll, rather, Aline's presence as herself provokes the irruption of reality in the scene. The *Teatro Oficina* also had strong involvement with children of various ages and cities in the show *Os Sertões*. In 2007, a group of children that participated in workshops of *Movimento Bexigão*, from the *Teatro Oficina*, were invited to participate in the show. During the group's tour through Brazil, which included Recife, Rio de Janeiro, and Salvador, the children were trained in *workshops* with the actors José Paiva, Camila Mota, and Freddy Allan to participate in the performances in the respective cities. This format repeated itself in their seasons in Berlin and Recklinghausen, Germany. In visual arts, one of Rivane Neuenschwander's more recent works is noteworthy. The installation *O nome do medo* is inspired by covers "to protect yourself from your fears" (MUSEU DE ARTE DO RIO, 2017), which was drawn and produced by children in workshops developed in the *Escola do Olhar* and at *EAV/Parque Lage*, Rio de Janeiro, Brazil. The covers were posteriorly recreated by Rivane and by the fashion designer Guto Carvalhoneto to compose the interactive work presented at the MAR (Museu de Arte do Rio) in February of 2017.

Despite the non-educational label, the artistic practices of the artists and groups cited constitute a significant learning environment (children, young adults, actors, non-actors, and spectators) in the field of contemporary art and theater, and bring important contributions to

the renovation of procedures, and even concepts of the current pedagogical practices. The peculiarity of the experiences blurs the boundaries between the training of the actor and teaching theater, the artistic experience and the learning process, production and fruition, characterized by a profound and fruitful contamination between artistic creation and pedagogy. In these practices, children find the necessary time and space to think, discuss, elaborate, and talk about important themes concerning human existence, like death, violence, love, and sexuality. In the countercurrent of the invisibilities of children's bodies, these experiences serve as conceptions of an incarnated childhood, rich with artistic possibilities.

When discussing the ethical dimensions, policies and pedagogies of the presence of children in contemporary theater, I find it necessary to criticize myself, and also problematize the context of academic research. There are few studies that are able to connect the relationship between artists and children in the context of artistic creation and performances, even so, it is possible to find some texts and interviews that approach the theme. The absence of speech from children and their perspectives on such experiences, therefore show us that we have a lot of improvement to make in studies concerning children and childhood. The main challenge for childhood researchers¹¹ is to discover and invent methodologies and the necessary techniques to hear the children speak about themselves, about childhood cultures, and about their participation in the artistic and cultural life of modern society. While this is not done, we will be conducting incomplete studies in which the subjects of the research do not have space to speak for themselves.

To conclude the brief reflection in this article, it is still necessary to touch upon one subject that I consider fundamental. The children who concern conservative groups, that attempt to censor works and stop the presence of childhood in cultural and artistic life, have

¹¹ Since the 1990s, there has been a concern in the field of Childhood Studies to discuss research methodologies that involve children and infants. To learn more about the topic, I suggest reading Anete Abramowicz, from the area of childhood education and sociology, and Marina Marcondes Machado, from the area of psychology and the performing arts. The main methodological challenge of my current research entitled "Presences of childhood in the contemporary scene", developed in a post-doctorate carried out at Unicamp with a scholarship from Fapesp, is precisely to bring the children's speech to the research.

defined ethnicity, race, and social class. As Eliane Brum (2018) remind us in “The invention of a childhood without body,” certain contexts show us that not all children “deserve” to be protected. Real scenes like military intervention and police violence against black youth in Rio de Janeiro, the massacre of the indigenous population, and the prison of children in cages on the borders of the United States, reinforce the already known contradictions of the main argument used to attack artists and works of art, according to which children need to be protected from the “evil” of this world. The detention of immigrants and refugees and the highly armed military occupations of poor communities, supported by the same conservative groups that protest against freedom of expression in art, promote humiliation, dehumanization, and therefore the removal of all and any children’s rights. Such contexts reveal which children “deserve” our protection, which children we choose to protect ourselves from. Thus, who is a child and who is not a child in the eyes of contemporary society is tragically defined.

Before this brutal reality, art and culture are a form of resistance against confining children, not only in literal cages, but also in their homes, churches, schools, social classes, and military occupied neighborhoods. Plays, dance, music, visual arts, and other artistic and cultural manifestations promote time and space of resistance against the invisibilities of children’s bodies and the silencing of their voices.

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