

Ethical and societal entanglements on Priscila Rezende's art: black-woman-performer

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Abstract

Countless women engage themselves in performative arts as a place for their societal, feminist and racial claims. This text revolves around these performative questions as being social movements acting in the fight for the rights of black women. To that end, we evoke the work of Priscilla Rezende, an artist from Minas Gerais, highlighting two of her works, namely “Bombril” and “Genesis 03:16”. Thus, the writing elicit recurring ethical implications which engender fundamental articulations within both feminist and black people fights.

KEYWORDS

Performance art. Social movements. Gender. Race.

Tecituras ético-sociais na arte de Priscila Rezende: mulher-negra-performer

Resumo

Inúmeras mulheres se dedicam às artes performativas como lugar de suas reivindicações sociais, feministas e raciais. Este texto reflexivo revolve estas questões performativas enquanto movimentos sociais atuantes na luta pelos direitos da mulher negra. Para tal, buscamos evocar o trabalho de Priscila Rezende, artista mineira, destacando duas de suas obras: “Bombril” e “Gênesis 03:16”. Assim, a escrita suscita implicações éticas recorrentes que engendram articulações fundamentais na luta feminista e negra.

PALAVRAS-CHAVE

Performance arte. Movimentos sociais. Gênero. Raça.

Women who dedicate themselves to Performance as an artistic manifestation, driving their feminist social claims, are numerous in several parts of the world. These movements - social and/or artistic, artistic and/or social - are deeply ingrained in an entanglement of the artists' actions. Among these women is Priscila Rezende, from Minas Gerais, who carries out her artwork discussing issues of a political and social nature, especially referring to gender and race. This reflective text seeks to revolve issues of feminist and racial rights in art as social movements in the struggle for the Woman's rights. To this end, we seek to evoke the artwork of this Brazilian performer highlighting two of her performances involved, in different ways, in this context.

Thus, the proposed writing is based on a central historical point, among many, to raise recurring implications in the body arts which engender fundamental articulations for the feminist and anti-racist struggle through the contemporary art bias: the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. The UDHR has undoubtedly contributed significantly to legitimizing various struggles and social achievements supporting voices before silence by submission to colonialist impositions. Subsequently, the reflection falls on the chosen delimitations, that are, gender and race, for finally to focus on Priscilla Rezende's artwork as one of the Brazilian artist's exponents of resistance and confrontation through the performance art.

Therefore, we seek to revisit, first, the circumstances of the establishment of the UDHR, as well as its current implications, which, oftentimes seem to neglect the social groups most massacred by powers of diverse natures such as the interests of the dominant colonizing cultures. Published in 1948, the UDHR, in its first article, proclaims that "all human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights." From this reference, it is possible to situate and highlight the undisputed contributions of the UDHR emphasizing not only achievements but also some necessary resignifications of current demands considering that in the seventy years of their existence many things have turned into the world. Thus, the aim of reflection is just to understand its original role from some historical aspects of the initiatives of its publication to discuss actions departing from the scene arts that

may be attentive and active about feminist and anti-racist social struggles, especially in Brazil. The UDHR may be one of the tools to support the establishment of human rights through the Arts. Priscila Rezende is a representing artist of actions that may be contributing to human beings may aspire a life based on ethics that freely respect differences as promulgated in the document.

Far from the naïve and romantic notion that UDHR would settle fair and legitimately all the violent and dominating impasses of humanity, just look at the world to see that convulsions in every way keep happening. Daily eruptions of systems that run out are revealed affecting many people. Overwhelming atrocities continue to plague especially the weaker and dependent social layers relegating them to endure in oblivion. In addition to the everyday forms best known as the facts and even crimes relating to gender issues, there are still voluminous magmas of suffering that are expelled in issues that aggregate large human contingents such as ethnic, political, and religious conflicts, as well as incalculable economic disputes generating deaths, escapes, exile. In Latin America, the current political situation in Venezuela, the tragedies that occurred in Minas Gerais resulting from dam breaks of large companies in Minas Gerais and, recently, the fires in the Amazon Rainforest are clear examples of the power implications in the less favored social classes. Many of these social problems will not be resolved easily and definitively, but attention must be paid to the developments and effects on those who have their rights violated by the interests of few sovereigns.

The UDHR dates from December 10, 1948, as a frontal and documentary refusal against the atrocities committed in the Second World War. As a legal reaction, it is born at this historic moment, but it was already being generated a few decades ago. The initial detonator seems to come from a domino effect of previous events as a consequence of one of the most violent territorial disputes of history that refer to the 18th century and the enslavements inflicted on so many social groups to expand and perpetuate the dominance of these achievements. Faced with the residual shards of the mentioned context above, sensitized voices perhaps

feeling debtors, guilties, or tributaries of violations affected by themselves, will react by conceiving, drafting, and legitimizing legally the document that is now in its seventy years. The reception and acceptance of the document comprising approximately five hundred translations carried out had its absorption time. Currently, some people repeatedly echo many of the terms of this document, but it is essential to act and constantly rethink its assumptions, nodded when this is accomplished from ethical attitudes that respect the knowledge of each subject or group engaged.

In this way, we pay attention to one way of claiming civil rights based on the evident body power in Performance Art. The artistic body actions can be an orchestrator of engaged movements with social struggles forging a space of resistance to male and white domination, in the case of Priscilla Rezende production here discussed. Therefore, understanding the way the Performance Art has historically consolidated itself has contributed to understanding the artist's choices bringing her as a fundamental element of this reflection. Performance as an artistic manifestation arose in an effervescent social, political, and cultural period, in the world post of two wars that characterizes the second half of the 20th century. At the same time, the UDHR was being drafted and promulgated. The artistic vanguards, at the beginning of the 20th century, already carried this strong questioning tone of the aesthetic assumptions considered universal and outlined the end of the *isms* in the arts. However, it was in the second half of the 20th century that the transgressor and transdisciplinary character of Performance, in its different aspects, effectively moved the field of the arts detonating its status quo.

Besides that, throughout the 20th century, many artistic forms found in-through-body its space-time of creation. The Performance Art, today, has attracted several practitioners, many of them focused on its political potential and the body strength as an exponent of social movements. The Performance's body is faceted by art poetry, often with spicy and incisive metaphors. The aspects of expansion and dynamism present in contemporary art, especially in the Performance Art, are extremely seductive because of their transdisciplinary aesthetic openness, and their critical social

posture, and their hardened, dominant, and colonialist values.

Diverse artists began to position themselves politically amid a scenario in which emerging social movements, questioners of the pre-established rules about gender, social class, sexuality, race, ethnicity, religiosity, among others. Aesthetically, the artistic class also sought other ways of action such as the interaction among the public, artwork, and artist, the search for not established spaces like theaters and museums, as well as experimented unusual relations with the temporality of the artwork. Thus, during these changes and questions, other possibilities and paths were outlined in the field of the arts, in an expanded sense, to dilute boundaries among artistic languages, knowledge from other areas, especially the social and human sciences, and so many other possibilities entering into experimental proposals. The dilution of borders can be among pieces of knowledge, among the arts or between the artist and public, placed the Performance as fertile ground to concentrate unheard poetic freedoms in the art history. Bia Medeiros (2017, p. 37), for example, has already used the name “Fuleragem” for some of her performative actions.

In this context, among the transformations that occurred in this above mentioned period, we noisily highlight the moment in which the visual artist body, beyond the actors and dancers, it also began to emerge as a study of plastic arts. Here, this body-art becomes part of creation, or even to be the artwork itself, and not just the living tool of its execution. On the other hand, in the theater, in dance, and other scenic arts, the body was always understood as artwork, and it was never departed from the artistic creations. It is necessary to recognize and assume the historical transformations of hierarchies that also forged their authority in Performing Arts. In the latter, often, who was considered the artist was the author of the play, the director, or the choreographer. Throughout the history of theater and dance in the colonizer West, actors and dancers were considered just executors for centuries. Thus, it is necessary to think how looks and understandings about the body in art have been established in peculiar and, at the same time, similar ways in the areas of visual arts, theatre, and dance.

The reflective path is chosen about the body in art also led us to consider be pertinent to introduce the thinking of other authors. Schneider cited by Phellan (1997, p. 61), for example, is an author who also suggests thinking of an approach to the emergence of the Performance Art in a plural way. The body protagonist of performative action is placed itself beyond the limits of conventional languages crossing pre-established borders. According to Diana Taylor (2012), Performance Art, even arising from various artistic practices, transcends its limits through the way of the body in a state of the art that drives an artistic magma into action. In this way, the Performance “combines many elements to create something unexpected” (TAYLOR, 2012, p. 54). The author also presents Stambaugh’s thought that the Performance Art would be like a “mutant sponge” able to absorb ideas and methodologies from many disciplines to, then, propose other ways to conceptualize the world (TAYLOR, 2012, p. 54). Performance, therefore, encourages to exploit the creative potential of these intersection zones through the artistic and academic field.

In addition to these aesthetic transformations, we consider pertinent to insist, too, that the emergence of this artistic manifestation overlaps itself precisely at the moment when various social struggles, including feminists and racists, gained more and more space how it turns out with the date of the publication of the UDHR in 1948. The Performance Art - questioning, irreverent, and transgressor - come to exist as another channel to bring discussions about social movements in a growth curve. In this context, Taylor recalls that it is

necessary to accept that performance often works within a system of subjugation power in which the body is one more product. Conquests, dictatorships, patriarchy, torture, capitalism, religions, globalization (etcetera) create their own bodies. (TAYLOR, 2012, p. 92.)

The perception of the overwhelming power of the body in Performance Art, of their power to communicate, express and overflow certain discourses or realities soon became aware of their own intensity. Consequently, the consciousness of the-in-through-body power and its strength as a transgressor of a crystallized order in favor of ruling classes, many artists relentlessly raised their flags in a state of the art, also blurring the

boundaries between art and activism.

A careful study on the current developments of contemporary art in the political field must necessarily consider the attitudes of art collectives and their affinities with recent social mobilizations. The combination of the production and consumption spheres, legitimized by neoliberalism, capitalist globalization and post-fordist strategies of organization and flexibilization of work, intensified in the 1990s world resistance [...]. (MESQUITA, 2002.)

To question how certain behaviors and thoughts have been perpetuated throughout history and how they have affected some groups such as women, the LGBT groups, the blacks, and autochthonous peoples, in short, it is fundamental when addressing cultural issues. In the case of women, Beauvoir (1960, p. 19) already recalled, in the mid-twentieth century, that “the presence involves the past and in the past, all history was made by men.” We add here that this story was not only told by men, but by white men imposing their eurocentric point of view as a device for a universality understanding of their culture. For this reason, we chose to bring Priscilla Rezende to this reflection by placing her as a strong representative of social movements endorsed by art bias. The impossibility of bring all the artworks of this performer and not incur the risk of making a superficial approach to her performative action, we cut two performances that we understand to be some of her main artworks, which are, “Bombril” and “Genesis 3:16.”

To enter into the Rezende’s feminist cultural perspective, it is essential to highlight the notion of culture chosen here, because the culture concepts are very broad and diverse. According to Candau, “explain the culture is to explain [...] why and how certain ideas are infected” (2016, p. 37). In this context, the perspective of feminist studies was fundamental for the building that thought. Thus, culture is understood in motion acting in the world. Therefore, it is pertinent to think of “culture as a process, not as an object, but as an activity” (COELHO, 2008, p. 19). However, caution must be exercised when addressing cultural concepts and the concepts to it, since sometimes they take the form of tradition and are used to naturalize certain behaviors. According to Coelho, traditions

presents themselves always as a strategy of power (political, religious, cultural) to maintain and justify themselves by inculcating values that are supposedly repeated (which are values because they are repeated and that are repeated because they are values) and that allegedly establish a continuity with the past (imagined, more than imaginary) that, for some reason, interests this power. (COELHO, 2008, p. 24)

According to Candau, the tradition “gives to the past a transcendent authority and, at the same time, refers to an updated past in the present” (CANDAU, 2016, p. 121-122). This perspective also contributes to reflect on how sexist behaviors have been perpetuated and naturalized, contributing too with a construction of a culture of violence against the woman. Thus, we insist on studying cultures in the present understanding them as a knowledge field. Therefore, cultural and feminist studies provide stimulating tools for research in the art field. We also reinforce that to beyond the envisaged actions from a macroscopic perspective of the culture, it is important to think about how these ideologies are perpetuated also in the microcosmic perspective. In this way, we understand that the viewpoints are cultural constructions and should not be analyzed apart from daily discourses and practices. Also, for this reason, we chose this artist in her performative and activist discourse in the art field.

By placing the feminine as the guiding thread of her work, Rezende brings women as protagonists of their artworks and evokes the gender concept to reflect their poetic-political choices. First, we present a gendered understanding as a category of historical analysis, according to Scott’s assumptions (1990). The author defines gender in two connected parts, which gender would be as an “element constitutive of social relations based on perceived differences between the sexes” and gender as a “first way of signifying power relations” (SCOTT, 1990, p. 21). Therefore, the analytical usefulness of gender would be the possibility of a further deepening into the constructed notions about feminine and masculine views, allowing to question these genders by recognizing that they are not fixed categories. In this context, gender would be

the social organization of perceived sexual difference. Which doesn’t that mean gender reflects or implement physical and natural differences between men and women, but rather that gender is the knowledge that establishes meanings for bodily differences. (SCOTT, 1990, p. 13.)

In this way, it was also inevitable to come across some biological aspects of cisgender women¹ placed as a patriarchal justification for solve differences about power issues. Thus, we seek to understand these biological aspects that become levers to the maintenance of the male power. It has interested us to think about how these biological issues can be read, interpreted, and culturally affected as we will observe in the hair of black women. This is repeatedly quoted as a biological reference and pointed, also, at Rezende's artwork. The issue is not to deny that there are differences between the sexed bodies, but in thinking about how the cultural meanings were constructed and, consequently, the power relations that are established from and for them. In this context, we emphasize again that Rezende's artwork highlighted here is carried out by a feminist and anti-racist bias, because through them, the artist seems to hear and to value the women's experiences whom she refers to. In general, the goal of the feminist movement is to achieve "a society without gender hierarchies" (RIBEIRO, 2014) in which this category would no longer be used as a justification for granting privileges or legitimizing oppression. Currently, the micropolitics begins to stand out among the discussions and claims of feminism from the moment it begins to understand that the

universal discourse is exclusionary; exclusionary because oppressions affect women in different ways, it would be necessary to discuss gender with cutouts of class and race, taking into account the women specificities. (RIBEIRO, 2014.)

It is in this context that we situate the artwork "Bombril" by Rezende, which will be pointed ahead. In this paper, the black woman is highlighted carrying her conflicts arising from the double preconception of gender and race. In this context, biological aspects undergo sociocultural crossings and require certain care and attention, especially because, oftentimes, they are often used to justify and naturalize sexist, racist, and oppressive behaviors. Beauvoir (1980) emphasizes how biological issues are used to attribute an essence to women creating fixed identities that would limit them to certain destinies – physiological, psychological, economic – predefined. The frictions between biological and cultural issues in their disputes by

¹ According to Bonassi, "cisnorma is a concept that gains scope in Brazilian academic literature in the second decade of 21st century and denotes the normality that legitimizes as healthy, natural and true only people who identify themselves with the sex assigned to them at birth, always assuming the binariety man/woman" (BONASSI, 2017, p. 23). Therefore, a cisgender woman would be the one who was born with the female sex and identifies as a woman.

power are insistent for millennia and described by the author half-century ago. Aristotle quoted by the author considers that women carry with them a kind of natural deficiency. In his words, “the female is female because of a certain lack of qualities” (Aristotle apud Beauvoir, 1980, p. 14).

The woman is recurrently thought from and in relation to the man. The female body is thought in relation to the male, the man is thought of as an absolute subject, as a model and reference. The woman, in turn, is thought as the other as seen in Leonardo da Vinci’s “Vitruvian Man”. Here it is even more significant that artists like Rezende transpire biological, cultural, and social crossings, among many, which can merge itself into her poetic work. We recognize that some concerns brought here cross and directly overflow from the bodies in the state of art, but which, first of all, are born of them – from the female bodies. In a patriarchal society, in which the heterosexual white man is regarded as a universal subject, there is still the constant need for the women – especially the black woman – assert yourself for the claim and keep your rights by requesting what appears in the form of public discourse at UDHR.

The activist poetics of feminism, on the other hand, do not seek to speak by, but with women placing them as protagonists of the discourses when they recognize the power of your speeches as legitimate pieces of knowledge. It is necessary to pay attention, also, to increase the diversity of female voices without restricting them to a specific group of women, which are those belonging to hegemonic feminism in which discourses seem to tilt themselves towards universalization. There are many issues in common that unite them as women, but it cannot be ignored that there are other issues that differ themselves to beyond a pretended universalization of the gender category, to beyond to hegemonic values embedded within the feminist resistance itself. A black woman experiences different situations than a white woman, as well as an elderly woman, who goes through different experiences of a young woman. Angela Davis, an American philosopher and sociologist, she recognized for her militancy for women’s rights and against social and racial discrimination, writes something similar about the late sixties and early seventies. For the author, the

women from ethnic minorities – and white women from working-class – suffered sexism effects in a different way from those of their sisters associated with the female movement of liberation and consequently, felt that the issues of white women of the middle class were, to a large extent, irrelevant to their life. (DAVIS, 2017, p. 34.)

Then, what this author considers essential to discuss is that in addition to the gender, racial, sexual orientation, socioeconomic, age, among others, should be thought too. When comparing the quotations, we also noticed that this is not a recent issue, but a historical oppressions which follow perpetuating² themselves. When they departing from different locations, women suffer different kinds of oppression beyond male attitudes and they experience them in different ways.

Ribeiro (2017), in turn, reiterates the notion that everyone has a place of speech. This speaks comes from different perspectives, because people are located in different social positions, whether in feminist discussions, in other social struggles, as well as in countless discursive scopes. The habit of hearing a single voice whether male, white, heterosexual, or cisgender often does forget that the voices start from a marked place. From this thought, the understanding of the plurality voices can be potent to break with the insistent and mistaken idea of a universal voice, questioning who holds the right to talk. Therefore, defining this location is a way of asserting. Recognize the personal plan as a political one is an issue raised in Rezende's artwork. To relate the dense source of her life experiences to her feminist studies, Rezende allows the public to visualize how the micro and macro contexts affect each other and how these experiences can reverberate in a performative artistic scope.

Bernstein (2001) analyzes the presence of the autobiography in solo performances of women artists. In general, the text of this author emphasizes that autobiography in the performing arts, *lato sensu*, should not be understood as a narcissistic act, but that it can be potent to think in its unfolding in a public sphere, in its relations with the other. According to Ar-

² The death of Marielle Franco, a black, peripheral, and bisexual city councilor, murdered in March 2018, it opens wide this violence and shows how a woman who dresses from a normative standard can disturb and destabilize the status quo when she occupies a power position. Perez writes that “in the context of gender and race violence, it is worth asking us how much the death of Marielle means triple feminicide, black genocide and the murder of activists and politicians in Latin America” (PEREZ, 2018).

cade, autobiographical work only makes sense if it can “connect your experiences with other people’s experiences” (Arcade apud Bernstein, 2001, p. 102). In this way, Bernstein compares Performance with autobiography, understanding both as open processes and highlights that the

public and private spheres are not dissociated, but interlinked and permeated by relationships of class, gender and sex. Therefore, instead of being an isolated, self-facing voice, the autobiographical narrative in solo performance works as a public instrument in creating a community sense. (BERNSTEIN, 2001, p. 5.)

Thus, Rezende’s autobiographical artwork comes from her experiences as a black woman to establish reflections on stereotypes, discriminations, and other acts of violence caused by racism. One of the performer artworks we selected to bring here is “Bombril” (figure 1), 2010. In this artwork, the performer cleans many metallic kitchen utensils rubbing them with her hair. The performance appropriates the term “bombril”, the name of a well-known brand of cleaning products used to refer pejoratively to the black hair characteristics. In this performance, the artist brings the “thought about the negative ways in which blacks are referred to their characteristics and how that ones are decisive for the placement of the race in the social environment” (REZENDE, 2013). We think about the strength that this black female body, by itself, evokes when performing. In the legitimized scenarios of contemporary art, in which many of the most prestigious artists are European white men, the perspective of a black and Brazilian female artist whose discourse is extremely powerful and current is fundamental to make people reflect on urgent issues addressed in her artwork.



Figure 1- Priscila Rezende, Bombril (2013). Source: Photo: Guto Muniz. Image available at <www.focoincena.com.br/bombril>. Accessed in: January 2019.

The other performance chosen for the proposed reflection is mainly on issues related to women. The work is called “Genesis 3:16” (figure 2), bible verse which says “and to the woman said: I will greatly multiply your pain, and your conception; with pain you will give birth to children; and your desire it will be for your husband, and he will dominate you.” In this artwork, Rezende relates religious precepts to gender violences based on women suffering. On the performer site³ says that “using a red lipstick, the artist reads bible excerpts together with real stories collected online or from women of your social circle.” Again, an art work that brings female reports, which add other meaning layers from the religiosity perspective. The choice of artist to name her performance with a biblical passage, which carries a weight of oppression to women, is a challenging attitude even from the dictates of Christian religious approaches.

³ The information available on the <http://priscilarezendeart.com/projects/genesis-0316-2017/> link, accessed January 2019.



Figure 2 - Priscila Rezende, *Gênesis 03:16* (2017). Source: Photo: Caio Gusmão.
Image available at <<http://priscilarezendeart.com/projects/genesis-0316-2017>>.
Accessed in: January, 2019.

Thus, it is necessary to highlight the role of dominating reflections detonated by innumerable sociocultural contexts throughout countless historiography available by the wide variety of circulating media. When we regard specifically to women and race, subsequently, rights were legitimized by UDHR. These rights, in turn, were not and are not the exclusive intellectual property of those who created the document and they are not in fact secured by it. Several social groups and knowledge areas are also focused on their studies on the power impulses that erode organized societies. In any case, the UDHR represented a significant historical attempt to consolidate the freedom, rights, and dignity of human beings through a document proposed and published by a considerable number of political representatives in the world. On the other hand, it is still necessary to think that the lines of the document were written by fists born on hegemonic cultural environments and that must be questioned constantly. Finally, we understand that the assumptions outlined decades ago by the UDHR, as well as its fundamental propositions and principles, are still in debate and must be subject to serious and sweeping pertinent questions depending on the context to which they are targeting. For this reason, the commitment to articulate a reflection from the art pieces of knowledge, especially the powerful body arts, is revealed by the commitment of different artists who are dedicated to lending their voices to many recurring and emerging social causes such as the performer Priscila Rezende.

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