Cultural Action and Artistic Action: shifting territories

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ABSTRACT – Cultural Action and Artistic Action: shifting territories – The article proposes a resumption of the notion of *cultural action* in the light of shifting and changes that it has been going through since its emergence in France in the last century, providing clues for the examination of these conceptions in Brazil today. From this perspective, the emergence of the notion of *artistic action* will be analysed, with a view to characterizing – only in a preliminary way – this field. The distinctions between the two perspectives will be addressed, as well as the relationships between them. Both have in common symbolic construction and the establishment of spaces for encounter, development of autonomy and reflection.

Keywords: Cultural Action. Artistic Action. Public Policy. Relational Performance. Social Participation.

RÉSUMÉ – Action Culturelle et Action Artistique: des territoires mouvants – Nous nous proposons de reprendre la notion d'action culturelle à la lumière des déplacements et des mutations qui la traversent depuis son avènement en France au siècle dernier. En le faisant nous jetons des pistes vers l'examen de ces conceptions au Brésil d'aujourd'hui. En prenant cette optique nous analyserons aussi l'émergence de la notion d'action artistique en vue de la cerner de façon préliminaire. Nous approcherons les distinctions entre les deux perspectives, ainsi que les relations entre elles. Toutes les deux visent une construction symbolique et l'instauration d'espaces de rencontre et de réflexion, ainsi que le développement de l'autonomie.

Mots-clés: Action Culturelle. Action Artistique. Politique Publique. Performance Relationnelle. Participation Sociale.

RESUMO – Ação Cultural e Ação Artística: territórios movediços – Propõe-se uma retomada da noção de *ação cultural* à luz dos deslocamentos e mutações pelos quais ela tem passado desde seu surgimento na França no século passado, lançando pistas para o exame dessas concepções no Brasil de hoje. Nessa ótica, será analisada a emergência da noção de *ação artística*, tendo em vista uma caracterização – necessariamente preliminar – desse campo. Serão abordadas as distinções entre as duas perspectivas, assim como as relações entre elas. Em comum, ambas envolvem uma construção simbólica e a instauração de espaços de encontro, desenvolvimento da autonomia e reflexão.

Palavras-chave: Ação Cultural. Ação Artística. Política Pública. Performance Relacional. Participação Social.

Introduction

Our purpose here is to contribute to resume the notion of *cultural action*, with a view to shifting and changes that it has been going through, launching clues for the examination of these conceptions in Brazil today. The emergence of the expression *artistic action*, on the other hand, will also be analyzed in order to preliminarily characterize this field of concepts. By doing so, we intend to propose elements to elucidate questions such as: *is the Artistic Action a concept affiliated with that of Cultural Action?* or *How do these two optics differ from each other?*

The trajectory of an Expression

One of the first occurrences of the expression cultural action in the bibliography produced in Brazil is in Paulo Freire's book, *Ação Cultural para a Liberdade e outros escritos* [Cultural Action for Freedom], a collection of articles published between 1968 and 1974. The well-known thoughts of this author are here detailed by his action among peasants from northeastern Brazil, in view of the social changes carried out *with* them, not *for* them. From the voluntary participation of the people interested in cultural centers, Freire proposes active and shared processes of construction of knowledge, having as a reference the dissolution of hierarchical levels and the possibility of transforming actions on the world.

Later, Teixeira Coelho raises the issue of cultural action in several publications, among which stands out the *Dicionário Crítico de Política Cultural* [Critical Dictionary of Cultural Policy] (2012). Teixeira Coelho is a required reference for those who are dedicated to the subject, as he systematizes the developments of the expression, as well as related concepts, providing a valuable map so that scholars can situate among a tangle of neighboring concepts, such as: cultural animation, mediation, cultural rights.

Cultural action is the axis of the public policy established in France by André Malraux, Minister of Cultural Affairs along the 1960s, aiming to "[...] make accessible the capital works of humanity and, at first of France, to as many French people as possible: to ensure the widest audience for our

cultural heritage and favor the creation of the works of art and the spirit that enrich them” (Krebs; Robotel, 2008, p. 25).

At that time, the meaning of culture involved in the ministerial mission, as can be deduced, was restricted to the Fine Arts and, furthermore, used to bring in its core an aspect that was soon diagnosed as problematic: in Malraux’s view, that goal should be achieved through the impact that the contact with the artistic work could have, and initiatives in the sphere of mediation or pedagogy were then eliminated from the implemented policy. Later, Malraux’s rejection of any possibilities that would allow contact with artistic manifestations that could go beyond the *revelation* that such contact would be able to arouse was duly revised, giving rise to other strands of cultural policy.

We are still in France, now in May 1968, during the political turmoil that marked that period of contesting, which had so much repercussion beyond French borders. Heads of the Houses of Culture [*maisons de la culture*] – important instruments of the policy of cultural decentralization in force – meet with theater directors and other artistic professionals to evaluate the actions led by Malraux and debate, at the heart of the ideas of the moment, guidelines that operate with a conception of *culture in action*, directly linked to the effective participation of citizens in matters of public life.

This is how, in that context, an important document emerges from long and heated discussions, the *Villeurbanne Declaration*, in which the politicization endeavor that animates the cultural action desired by the group at that moment is made explicit: to invent occasions in which people can politicize themselves, choose freely, “[...] beyond the feeling of helplessness and absurdity that never ceases to arouse [in people] a social system in which men are practically never in a position to invent their own humanity *together*” (Abirached, 2005, p. 195). The aim is above all to fight the inertia and passivity that reinforce the formation of individuals focused only on the consumption of goods, characteristic of capitalism. This notion came to us and gave rise to a wide variety of practices developed in Brazilian lands.

From the Villeurbanne Declaration, the idea of cultural action is resumed, whose praxis aims to focus on relationships between human

beings. The traditional concept of culture as a pre-existing content to be transmitted is contested. It is now about thinking of the human being as a creator of culture and not just as a beneficiary who enjoys or not the culture produced by another one. Cultivating oneself in relation to one another according to one's own needs and true demands becomes the scope of these actions.

The pathway is open to another sense of culture, closer to anthropology, according to which the term covers, not only the arts and letters, but also ways of life, values, beliefs, traditions of a given social group. From this point of view, therefore, there is no human being devoid of culture, and actions in the cultural field can assume much more diversified aspects than those envisioned so far.

One of the signatories of this declaration is Francis Jeanson, philosopher and activist of the anti-colonialist struggle in Algeria, who was then in charge of the creation of the Houses of Culture. An engaged intellectual, Jeanson defines himself as someone focused on the ever-delicate balance between action and the search for meaning¹ in his role in society. He is the author of *L'action culturelle dans la cité* (1973), a reference work for the study of our topic, from which we will try to advance in dealing with the issues outlined above.

"If cultural action interests me, it is as far as it tries to propose to the different members of an actual population the double image of our present alienations and our eventual powers" (Jeanson, 1973, p. 40). Throughout the book, Jeanson reiterates how the gradual overcoming of alienation is correlated with the exercise of man's constitutive dialectical relationship, namely, the fact that he is both the bearer of a singularity and belongs to the human collectivity. "Indeed, men do not know all they are capable of [...] Among many of them latent capacities only emerge when they can share them" (Jeanson, 1973, p. 193). The collective is always greater than the sum of one's capacities, states Jeanson, according to whom the responsible for cultural action has the task of "facilitating the sharing of knowledge, invention, silence and amazement among men" (Jeanson, 1973, p. 193).

It can be recognized in these passages striking principles of non-formal education, the so-called grassroots education and certain recent pedagogical

trends, as well as the operative mode of artistic groups and collectives, based on the breaking of hierarchies and on the sharing of responsibilities at the heart of the creative process. Especially regarding Brazil, these passages also identify points that can be considered germs of *soirees* and community parties, in which poetry and music engender bonds of solidarity, opening doors for the invention of common goals and transforming relations in the daily life of the metropolis.

A Fertile Public Policy

Modalities of cultural action are spread in the city of São Paulo and throughout Brazil from the need to offer social counterparts by artists and theatrical groups of different origins and aesthetic affinities that benefit from government subsidies. We are talking about initiatives of approximation with any and all inhabitants of the city, resulting from public policies aimed at the development of the theater and the greater and better access of the population to it. The subsidies to which we refer imply a clear exercise of sharing means and modes of production through the maintenance and creation of continuing work projects, based on action plans that are not restricted to an event or work.

The best example of a public policy along these lines was the *Lei de Fomento ao Teatro da Cidade de São Paulo* [São Paulo City Theater Development Law], which was the result of the class struggle and was closer to its original bases between 2000 and 2018, when the law was put to the test. The initial project envisaged investing in continuing research, rooted in the city through the temporary funding of theater groups committed to building ties with the city's population, that is, to forming audiences.

Thus, social counterparts are configured as a set of actions developed as a complement to theatrical production within the scope of the fostered projects. These are actions that not only bring the spheres of art and education closer together but allow a mutual interference between artistic and pedagogical processes. In some cases, the social counterpart proposed by the groups takes the form of artistic workshops in which we observe a significant interaction with the developing artistic creation. In these situations, there is a transit or circulation of ideas and poetics between what is experienced in the workshop and what is observed in the process of

creation articulated in parallel by the artists. Even if the focus of such workshops turns to passing on knowledge, striking examples reveal that they also have another content, closer to the exchange and sharing of concerns and risks, which mobilize all involved. Based on the law, it can be said that the focus shifts from the staging itself towards more inventive and multiple modalities of encounter with the city and its inhabitants.

In this sense, when in São Paulo the *Collective Dolores Boca Aberta* proposes an initiation workshop to the *Teatro Mutirão*, it teaches emerging groups to self-manage and to build arboreal arenas to be used as scenic spaces. Thus, this collective proposes a cultural action. Participants who had access to this knowledge were able, to some extent, to create their own spaces and to mobilize their own community around theatrical performance. By presenting their project to the Municipal Department of Culture, the *Teatro Documentário Company* goes further: it proposes a social counterpart integrated to the construction of the scene in process. The topic of the successive restrictions placed on public space is addressed to the population of the neighborhood in which the group is installed, based on reports of four small businessmen established there for a long time. Conversation circles with interested residents, lectures, memory recovery through images and narratives, and various scenic experimentation feed the group's creation, but fulfill in parallel a primordial function, identified with the principles of cultural action. Faced with the evidence of the destruction of the neighborhood's architectural memory, local people mobilize and debate the issue, reflecting on ways of positioning themselves in relation to it.

We will see later that more directly artistic forms of action are also proposed as a social counterpart in projects awarded with public subsidies.

Thus, in São Paulo, in the first decade of this century, we had the experience of a public policy whereby actions proposed by different theater groups turn to ordinary citizens, considered not only potential spectators, but partners, interlocutors, debaters of questions posed on the agenda by artists immersed in the most diverse creative processes.

Returning to the foundations of cultural action, certain principles can be highlighted: addressing a concrete, geographically circumscribed population with a variety of social conditions, in which it will seek to

multiply contacts; the act of inciting them to become aware of themselves; attention to the diversity of the target population and the intended intervention modes. Regarding the latter, Jeanson points out as possibilities different modes of expression such as “[...] language (spoken or written), music, performing arts, painting, sculpture, architecture and urbanism, cinema, radio, television, scientific research, philosophical reflection, etc.” (Jeanson, 1973, p. 51). Contributing to the human being to broaden its means of existence, without, however, establishing the direction to be followed is one of the key guidelines; the aims are not established *a priori*, and it is up to the group to invent their own purposes. It is recognized here a clear political position within which the conquest of autonomy by the citizen is at the head of the process.

In any case, in the foreground what is emphasized is the encounter, the dialogue, the confronting and the exchange of meanings between the participants; the symbolic production of the group is both the source and the basic resource of cultural action and the most directly artistic actions derived from it. This is the case of initiatives conducted today by the Brazilian civil society, which has in the activism of identity nature, such as LGBTQ+ and black movement groups, for example, an increasingly recognized artistic production. Cultural and artistic action merge here in an inseparably way.

Back to the meetings that led to the drafting of the Villeurbanne Declaration, it is noted that theatrical manifestations are approached in a privileged way in relation to the other arts, given the massive presence of directors and heads of the Houses of Culture whose focus has almost always been on the scene. In a certain passage of the text, art and culture are addressed as distinct and complementary spheres:

We therefore commit ourselves to assume in every circumstance this dialectical link between theatrical (or more broadly artistic) action and cultural action, so that their respective demands do not cease to enrich one another, even in the very contradictions that will not cease to exist between them (Jeanson, 1973, p. 196).

The question announced at the opening of this article finds in this last passage the indication of a possible first answer: the association, even laborious between artistic and cultural dimensions, is part of the idea advocated by the signatories of the manifesto. In other passages of the book,

the theatrical experience is valued as a path leading to creation. In other words, the power of the emerging imagination in cultural actions would lead to a proportional need for communication to be undertaken by theater, what would allow “to give consistency to freedom of expression” (Jeanson, 1973, p. 222).

Our questions about the interest in distinguishing the notions that concern us – cultural action and artistic action – progresses when in the above mentioned *Dicionário Crítico de Política Cultural*, we find on page 173, “It is a common understanding that cultural action is primarily concerned with creating the conditions for the emergence of aesthetic disposition”, which is characterized as “the evidence of an availability or openness for the experimentation of a particular artistic practice”. From this perspective, the peculiarity of cultural action involving the so-called aesthetic disposition would eliminate the need to adopt another concept, that of properly artistic action, since the latter would be contained in the first.

At this point we may wonder about the relevance of using two terms to distinguish dimensions seen as complementary or contained within one another. When comparing current manifestations of cultural and artistic action, not only in Brazil but outside it, we will observe that a common element characterizes them. Both work, as Jeanson points out, “in favor of a transformation of non-democracy, or formal democracy, into an increasingly real democracy” (Jeanson, 1973, p. 139). The prospect of individuals becoming citizens, which is to assume democratic forms of participation in society, is common to cultural action and to specifically artistic action.

Around Participation

Participation is today a key notion that has generated the most diverse initiatives in the non-formal field, with a view to educating citizens. Moreover, since the 20th century it has been configured as a central vector of different artistic modalities. The very notion of participatory democracy can be a guideline for those working in the sphere of cultural and / or artistic action: “[...] each one is able to acquire the skills to correctly judge a

matter of public interest from the moment they are offered the means to acquire them” (Zask, 2011, p. 205).

A valuable contribution to the deepening of this notion is provided by reading the work of Joëlle Zask, professor at *Université de Provence: Participer. Essai sur les formes démocratiques de la participation* [Participating, an essay on the democratic forms of participation]. The outlines of her book are sharpened when, from the very first pages, she makes a statement that raises a critical examination of the cheap use of the term: “[...] participation limited to the engagement of the participants in an enterprise whose form and nature have not been previously defined by themselves can only be an illusory form of participation” (Zask, 2011, p. 9). Making a surprising intersection between philosophy, anthropology, political science and aesthetics, the author analyzes three experiences in situations of participation of individuals in the elaboration of the purposes of a group, whose subtle articulation and balance show the complexity of the phenomenon. It is about *taking part, contributing* and *benefiting*.

The first one, taking part, involves the pleasure of doing something together, of taking a common action, of combining your aims and efforts with those of others. It “[...] implies individuals permeable to the innovative quality of experience, and activities that are deepened or enriched by the diversity of points of view, practices and commitments that make them emerge” (Zask, 2011, p. 48). The association is recurrently reiterated by Zask as providing a mutual enrichment between the individual and the social field. The act of contributing, the second of these experiences, is analyzed by the author as a personal investment along which the participant commits to this common point that is the *raison d’être* of the group and changes, to some extent, the perspective of the same group.

In contributing, it goes from the personal contributions of individuals through which the common point can evolve according to the expectations and initiatives of those who take part in it and, because of this permanent process of adaptation and rectification, remain common (Zask, 2011, p. 152).

A benefit, in the broad sense, is something that provides an advantage or satisfaction. In the author’s view, it is characterized as “[...] the part that individuals receive from their environment and that is indispensable to their participation in terms of taking part and contributing” (Zask, 2011, p. 224). Zask’s analysis proves to be extremely valuable when it plunges into

the intricacies of a cultural or artistic action and the inevitable situations of tension they may generate within the group.

Art and Artistic Action: conceptual fluctuations

In order to delineate the notion of artistic action, it seems necessary to constantly keep it in friction with the notion of cultural action, because to some extent one derives from the other. The second – artistic action – derives from the expansion of the first one's field. In other words, when the verified action does not extend to the point of configuring itself as a process, it occurs more punctually. When an action is intended for everyone and not for a defined community, circumscribed within more or less precise territory; when an action is restricted to the encounter with a device organized by one or more artists as a way of briefly experiencing a given situation, we are faced with an artistic action.

Recognizing such action as derived from cultural action means that it relies on the same principle as the former, aimed at a symbolic construction, the achievement of autonomy by citizens, the invention of spaces of encounter and the debate and reflection on the world. However, such situations do not always happen in adequate conditions for the cultural action to be fully established, with the proper construction of bonds and the length of permanence that are necessary for those involved to become autonomous in the definition of means and ends; artistic action takes place under conditions that are more precarious and insufficient than those necessary for cultural action to take place.

It happens from a certain suspension of the functions originally assigned to those who make art and those who work in the field of education, because it allows individuals without prior knowledge or requirements to participate together in a common artistic manifestation, regardless of where it occurs. In this sense, it is possible to recognize artistic actions in the street, as well as in other public spaces, in various centers focused on non-formal education, in Houses of Culture and even at school. Considering that cultural action is associated with non-formal education, by extension artistic action would also be linked exclusively to this context. Contrary to this evidence, however, we can identify traces of artistic action also in school, at least in two circumstances. The first of these, in situations

of playing and improvising in the classroom, in which art is present, that is, the artistic experience cannot be considered less important than those developed in spheres that are officially intended for art. The proof lies in the recurrence with which, as teachers, we experience situations of great aesthetic pleasure in the face of improvisations explored by students in the classroom. Could we then fail to recognize that such ephemeral and hardly repeated situations are configured as artistic action?

Another situation that happens to us refers to moments in which art teachers promote the reperformance of some action in the classroom, inviting students to participate in the action presented, such as in the performing classes explored by Denise Rachel at CIEJA Ermelino Matarazzo, in eastern São Paulo city. In this context, the teacher and performer had already experimented with performance programs, such as Marina Abramovic's *The Artist is Present*, when she sat quietly in front of another chair in which students were invited to sit for a few seconds, looking into her eyes. Thus, from these examples, we claim that school can also be considered a possible ground for the emergence of artistic actions.

We will present below some urban performances and interventions that assume the function of artistic action, without, however, ceasing to be performance or urban intervention. Thus, the purpose of delimiting this notion is not in claiming the recognition that certain performances would be anything other than performances, but in reiterating that actions of this nature, usually relational, that propose situations of coexistence and participation in various political and social contexts take on the role of artistic action.

What is the point then in stating that these or those actions can be considered artistic, since they are already defined from other conceptions? Affirming them as such amplifies the value attributed to them, alerting artists, teachers and spectators to how political and sensitive, aesthetic and accessible an action can be. Artistic actions are configured as sufficiently structured processes, to the point of collaborating in the formation of individual subjects, leading them to articulate, with autonomy and property, new processes and sharing of knowledge, inventing their own means and ends. On the other hand, nothing prevents us from recognizing that those are equally motivating experiences, enough to collaborate with the personal processes of subjectivation, to put the adult body in a state of

playing, to propose other forms of debate and collective reflection in the city. Let's move on to the examples.

Initially, we would like to evoke a widely known and discussed work created in the late 1960s by one of the first Brazilian performance artists: Hélio Oiticica. Coming from the visual arts, Oiticica abandons the two-dimensional forms and creates environments to be experienced by the spectator, inviting them to engage their bodies in the encounter with the art work, not only by manipulating them, but physically activating them in what would be their most noble function. Extremely innovative and restless, the artist introduces nationally – alongside with artists such as Lygia Clark and Lygia Pape – a wave of creations based on the idea of participation. Taking Zask's concept as a reference, the device created by Oiticica enables a pleasant and collective mode of participation capable of altering the directions initially foreseen by the artist. By collaborating with the community of the Samba Group *Estação Primeira de Mangueira*, Oiticica creates the *Parangolés*, considered by him a *total-artwork* or *antiart par excellence*, as the use of these colorful capes by the audience transforms the creation, making each participant a co-creator. Each person who wears a *Parangolé* composes a particular dance with it, created by the combination of their walking cadence and their most significant movements. Each body articulates a unique expressiveness and derives specific benefits from the experience. On a broader scale, if we recall the opening of the exhibition *Opinião 65* [Opinion 65], at Rio de Janeiro's Museum of Modern Art (MAM), in which residents of *Morro da Mangueira* are prevented from entering, the use of *parangolés* gains another dimension, incorporating a collective demonstration in front of the museum. Participation, in this sense, promotes a greater benefit, associated with the breaking of social and ethnic barriers, and it is configured as a shifting of art from the intellectual sphere into action and activism.

Another possible example in which the artistic function implicit in an urban intervention is recognized is *Turkish Jokes*, created by the Danish Jens Haaning, originally performed in 1994 in an Oslo city square. This time, it is less the participation that is at stake than the idea of conviviality. This is a sound piece composed of funny Turkish stories, passed on by loudspeakers, concentrating in the Norwegian square a small community of foreigners who came out of their exile for a moment.

Haaning's devices directly and sensitively touch the cultural complexity of the context of their accomplishment, pointing to the presence of immigrants who are never included in the local tabloids simply because they do not speak the same language. Through this intervention, this deterritorialized micro community is given the opportunity to laugh and enjoy stories that only they can understand, attesting their presence in that country. It is through the emission of this sound piece that such an encounter occurs, so that the action stems from the grouping of people around the installation and not the audio itself. The isolated stories, in this case, do not configure a situation; it only happens because this micro community is highlighted and observed by other citizens.

In this way, *Turkish Jokes* achieves a historic feat: reversing the exiled status of Turkish immigrants by drawing a "utopia of proximity" (Bourriaud, 1998). What the action promotes is the investment in the subjectivity of a population, through the symbolic reconstruction of a common territory. Concentrating in one square people of the same origin is a bet on the effect of this presence, generating an aesthetic and ethical perception capable of mobilizing consciences. As much as the agglomerated community has not taken a direct part in organizing the sound piece, for example by choosing or telling the stories thorough the loudspeakers themselves, the artist does not control what might happen once they come together. That is, there is a collective benefit in this meeting of laughing individuals, so that the participants of this action can contribute to develop it from the device proposed by Hanning. The mere fact that the work brings together a set of Turkish speakers is already a gesture of dissent, an alteration of the urban landscape, capable of modifying, even temporarily, the way of enjoying the city.

Nicolas Bourriaud refers to actions such as *Turkish Jokes* as interstitial poetics, potent enough to validate art as a state of encounter, underlining the convivial and socializing dimensions, not necessarily at the level of massive collectivities, but also of micro communities and micro encounters that testify ephemeral relations with each other. The idea of conviviality also deserves to be highlighted by observing the examples chosen to reflect on the notion of artistic action. Jorge Dubatti, an Argentinean researcher, invokes Florence Dupont's studies on oral practices in Greek-Latin culture, particularly the *symposium* and the banquet, to discuss the idea of socializing

in the theatrical sphere. Orality is a phenomenon immersed in these situations, because the live and *in situ* passing on of texts implies, at least, the presence of others or of a group of listeners, stimulating social bonds. For the researcher, theatricality can be defined from the identification, description and analysis of their friendly structures, although he does not focus strictly on a study of language (Dubatti, 2012).

Another example that converges the ideas of participation and conviviality, promoting an artistic action that can be reperformed in other contexts, refers to the attempt to perform *O sussurro de Tatlin #6* [Tatlin's whisper #6], proposed by Tania Bruguera to happen in *Praça da Revolução* [Revolution Square], in Havana, in November 2015. The action consists of a stage with a microphone, open for those who want to express themselves publicly for one minute, flanked by two guards. In 2009, the action takes place at the Tenth Arts Biennial of the Cuban capital, but inside a room, with each participant carrying a white dove on the shoulder, while making their announcement (a reference to the dove that landed on the shoulder of Fidel Castro, in the inaugural speech of the Revolution of 1959). On the performance, scheduled to take place in the Revolution Square, the action was banned by the government and the artist was arrested, along with an entourage of artists and activists, with her passport and computer confiscated. Regardless of the facts, Bruguera's proposal offers social protagonism to anonymous people and, moreover, authorizes their speech and legitimates the debate, something strictly prohibited in the country. The artist highlights the limits imposed by the Cuban dictatorship, the restriction of freedom and right to free expression of thought. When the action took place within the Biennial, what happened was a clash of ideas, a listening exercise on different points of view, made explicit in this symbolic platform.

In this example, we notice a case of participation in which citizens take part in the action, contribute to its development and build common benefit, through the exercise of coexistence and, above all, of listening, as well as a reflection on the political conditions of the country, stressing the right to express their opinions and having freedom of speech. The artist complains, with this action in which her body is not visible, "the right to be political and not just an entity of economy or of symbolic exchanges to make history" (quoting the letter she sent to General Raul Castro).

In the same train of thought, another example may be enlightening to delimit the moving terrain associated to the notion of artistic action. The activist action *Lava la Bandera* [Wash the Flag], called by the *Colectivo Sociedad Civil*, initially held at the *Plaza Mayor* of Lima, Peru in May 2000, and then repeated every Friday in different parts of the city – besides being appropriated by citizens of other countries in similar situations of discontent with their rulers – consists in washing the national flag in public square. A symbolic gesture by a significant portion of the population with the intention of clearing the political field, revealing discredit and denouncing the corruption unleashed throughout the Fujimori government in Peru. In this case, the collective that summoned the action does not even claim its authorship, nor consider such an artistic action, but a political one. However, we venture here to affirm that citizens who are willing to wash their own flag publicly use a collective symbolic game, expressing themselves in their own way and experiencing indeed an artistic action, capable of formalizing an idea and expressing their dissatisfaction.

Still in the urban context, but summoning bystanders to compose her work, the Mexican artist Mónica Mayer stretched a clothesline in the street, inviting women to complete the following sentence: “as a woman, the thing I hate the most about the city is...”. The year is 1978 and the action is titled *El Tendedero*, clothesline in Spanish. As it should be, the artist has repeated this intervention in different countries over the years, noticing how current her performance would still be today. The contribution of each woman who interrupts the course of her day to write about her troubles, expressing herself in her own way without the artist’s interference, configures a way of participation in tune with the principles of participatory democracy, as advocated by Joëlle Zask.

In a more intimate sphere, Beatriz Cruz also calls on women to be part of her action, not only by participating, but by experimenting with a common device and expressing themselves in whatever ways it suits them best. This is the [provoc]action *Desfrutar-se* (Enjoy oneself) which invites women to masturbate using a fruit of their preference and then, to write about the experience. The artist, in turn, is responsible for spreading the scandalous reports, to use the adjective employed by the performer herself, in her action program, through the city walls and poles. Following the same feminist trend as the Mexican performer, Beatriz Cruz shares the idea of a

highly radical masturbatory practice, inviting other women to live their own experience. This is not a situation of direct contact, as participants enjoy their bodies in their private homes; what circulates and, to some extent, coexists, are the narratives arising from this experimentation. This or any other sexual practice, would hardly be considered an artistic action, except that, in this case, there is a textual production whose form and nature is completely in charge of the author of each story, protected by anonymity, whose veracity can hardly be verified. Not that this is significant information to our analysis, but it is noteworthy that the subject is still taboo today and is rarely discussed by women publicly. Going back to the principles organized by Zask to think about participation, the present example seems to consolidate a broad benefit for both women taking part in the action and for the unknown (and in inaccurate quantity) population who are lucky to find one of these reports on their way.

To conclude the list of examples brought in the difficult task of delimiting the notion of artistic action, we will return to the proposal of social counterpart mentioned in the first part of the text, a requirement for the projects benefited by the *Lei de Fomento ao Teatro* [Law of Theater Development] in the city of São Paulo. In 2012, the *Coletivo Teatro Dodecafônico*, one of the groups benefited by the 19th edition of the edict, organizes a proposal consisting of five urban interventions in five distinct points of the city. Each of these interventions was preceded by a workshop in which were shared procedures for creating the theater play *O QUE ALI SE VIU* [What has been seen over there], previously performed. It was also shared the issues emerging from the discussions raised by the text, which was created in reaction to Lewis Carroll's books in which Alice is the central character. The action is called *São Paulo através do Espelho* [São Paulo through the Mirror] and aims to incorporate all workshop participants into the corresponding intervention, so as not only to share knowledge articulated in the research of the Collective, but also to exchange, receive, influence and suffer interference from foreign bodies to the original creation of the play. It seems relevant, in this last example, to highlight a fact that was not foreseen when the Collective drafted its proposal. After performing this series of interventions, the play, originally created for *SESI Vila Leopoldina*, would fulfill a season in *Parque Trianon*, located on *Avenida Paulista*. The experience of sharing and creation lived in the interventions

gained such dimension that the new staging underwent significant changes, integrating in its structure performance actions developed in the workshops, besides incorporating some actors who participated in the interventions and were not originally in the cast of the play.

São Paulo através do Espelho is an example in which the social counterpart resulted in artistic action and not cultural action, as in the examples mentioned above. Participation was not restricted to doing something, but consisted of an effective contribution, altering the device proposed by the Collective. Even though the final form of the staging, in this Trianon version, has been refined by the artists of the Collective, it is undeniable that the contribution of the aggregate artists has altered the ongoing process of creation.

After looking at this sequence of actions listed as examples of what we seek to define as artistic action, some common principles can be highlighted. These are interdisciplinary actions that erupt in the urban territory without being awaited, calling on bystanders to interact or even activate the work. They are relational and convivial actions, open to participation; they can be developed in different contexts, including the internet as a means of exchanging information. Such actions not only depend on the encounter with the spectator to happen but may also do without the presence of the artist, whose function shifts from the act of performing to the organization of interrelational devices. In this sense, besides putting the experience of the bystanders in the foreground, and expressively summoning their bodies, these actions can result in narratives, drawings, photographs and videos. The spectators thus assume a place of co-authoring in the creation and not only of enjoying the work. Thus, such actions range from commonplace or political engaged propositions, aimed at challenging public power, with greater or lesser degree of civil disobedience. They necessarily pass through a practice, confronting the restrictions inherent in the formalization of an idea, an emotion, a symbolic meaning to be shared.

Such action is usually punctual and reinforces the quality of the experience, as a different time from the daily flow; it is a rupture, an eruption, a deviation from it. It is an artistic experience that is not confused with the experience of putting oneself as a spectator of something. We are referring to the moment when the viewer is called upon to assume the role

of player and the change that occurs from their acceptance of this creative responsibility. From the moment he says yes to the development of the inaccurate and unknown facts to come, the artistic action begins to be instituted.

The difficulty of traversing this moving terrain comes from the fact that it is built on a constantly expanding and redefining foundation, especially in today's times: the definition of what we consider today as Art. To the extent that we can broaden the scope of this field, new possibilities open to us to understand what artistic action can be in this continuous friction with the notion of cultural action. Joëlle Zask states that, either as producers or as observers of art, we can only claim that a certain object (and we add here the dimension of action) is regarded as artistic when we find that the experience arising from it is powerful enough to engender the multiplication or pluralization of the experiences. "Only an object that can give rise to a *continuum* of diverse and personal experiences can be qualified as artistic" (Zask, 2011, p. 149).

Thus, we can consider that artistic action stems from a proposition organized by some artist or group of artists, without such figures being highlighted. In contrast, the devices of playing are triggered by other individuals, initially not engaged in the action. They are not actions to be watched, but lived as catalysts for emerging issues. Eleonora Fabião states that performers who break with their hierarchical position within creation, become cultural provocateurs, a timely definition for the overlapping terrain of cultural and artistic actions.

It can be said that behind each of these initiatives there is an intention of social transformation, of raising the awareness of a population and the impression of marks in the political positioning and behavior of those who live such experiences. Action thus becomes a public and collective phenomenon, an ethical act, a symbolic ritual (in the words of Ileana D. Caballero), closer to a situation than to an artwork.

Modalities of cultural action need continuous processes to become effective; a certain extension of time constitutes its unavoidable component. Artistic actions in the field of scene, in turn, imply the realization of gestures that give form to a way of being in the world. In both cases what is at stake is the perspective of the continuous construction of the human

being through the multiplication of their relations with their fellows and the awareness of their power of action on this same world, even if on a small scale.

Note

- ¹ See the documentary *Francis Jeanson: itinéraire d'un intellectuel engagé*, by Catherine de Grissac and Bernard Vrignon (2011). See also in Godard's *La chinoise* a scene in which Jeanson plays himself talking about cultural action.

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