

PARC (Relational Art Performance as Healing - RAPH): performance and somatic experiencing

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ABSTRACT – PARC (Relational Art Performance as Healing - RAPH): performance and somatic experiencing – The article proposes an enlargement of Pablo Helguera's concept of *socially engaged art*, used to describe artistic works that blur the boundaries between social project and artistic project. From the analysis of the creation process of the performance “*Bate-Papo na Cama*” (*Bed Time Talking*), which consists in putting my bed in public spaces of different countries in the world, the article aims at thinking how the artistic practice can be intensified and deepened by the resources offered by Somatic Experiencing (SE). The practice, developed by Peter Levine, helps to think, design, and implement artistic border projects, not only between artistic and social projects, but that blurs frontiers with therapeutic plans, whether individual or collective, generating the concept of Relational Art Performance as Healing – RAPH.

Keywords: **Performance. Relational Art. Somatic Experiencing. Socially Engaged Art. Public Spaces.**

RÉSUMÉ – PARC (Performances d'Art Relationnel comme Soins): art de la performance et somatic experiencing – L'article propose un élargissement du concept *d'art socialement engagé* de Pablo Helguera, utilisé pour décrire des travaux artistiques qui brouillent les frontières entre projet social et projet artistique. En partant de l'analyse du processus de création de la performance *Discussion au Lit* et qui consiste à placer mon lit dans des espaces publics de divers pays du monde, l'article propose une réflexion sur la manière dont une performance peut être approfondie et enrichie par les ressources offertes par l'expérience somatique (SE) de Peter Levine, conduisant ainsi à la possibilité de concevoir, élaborer et réaliser des projets qui seraient non seulement à la frontière du projet social et du projet artistique, mais qui incluraient également, ce faisant, le projet thérapeutique individuel ou collectif, gérant le concept de PARC (Performances de Arte Relacional como Cura) – Performances d'Art Relationnel comme Soins.

Mots-clés: **Art de la Performance. Art Relationnel. Expérience Somatique. Art Socialement Engagé. Espace Public.**

RESUMO – PARC (Performances de Arte Relacional como Cura): performance e somatic experiencing – O artigo propõe um alargamento do conceito de *arte socialmente engajada* de Pablo Helguera, utilizado para descrever trabalhos artísticos que borram as fronteiras entre projeto social e projeto artístico. A partir da análise do processo de criação da performance *Bate-Papo na Cama*, e que consiste em colocar a minha cama em espaços públicos de diferentes países do mundo, o artigo pretende pensar como a prática artística pode ser intensificada e aprofundada pelos recursos oferecidos pelo *somatic experiencing* (SE). A prática, desenvolvida por Peter Levine, ajuda a pensar, conceber e realizar projetos artísticos fronteiriços não somente entre projeto artístico e projeto social, mas também que borrem as fronteiras com o projeto terapêutico, seja ele individual ou coletivo, gerando o conceito de performances de arte relacional como cura (PARC).

Palavras-chave: **Performance. Arte Relacional. Experiência Somática. Arte Socialmente Engajada. Espaço Público.**

Give me a place where I can put my lever and I'm moving the world.
Archimedes



Image 1 – *Bate-Papo na Cama*, in partnership with the artist Álvaro Villalobos. Museu de Arte Contemporânea de Niterói (MAC), Niterói/RJ, 2013. Picture: Sammara Niemeyer

The engaged dimension of an artwork is, in my point of view, one of its intrinsic characteristics. While in the past a lot of artworks represented specific themes to raise the population awareness, since the 1960's it is the participation criteria of the public that take place by the modalities proposed by the artworks. Therefore, visual arts get out of the white cube and go to the streets, dancing becomes a challenge to the dance activity itself and the performing arts explore novel audience participation modes. The political dimension of the artwork does not rely on its content anymore and starts to permeate the artistic device feature itself, what increasingly aims at a larger proactivity from the spectator. This way, since the 1990's, artistic projects with social orientation have proliferated in Biennials and Contemporary Art Exhibitions, emphasizing the issue of collaboration and the active participation of spectators in the construction of a common work, providing what the art critic Shannon Jackson defines as “social turn in contemporary art” (Jackson, 2011, p. 11).

This paper concerns the research project *Socially Engaged Performance* that I develop at the Universidade Federal do Estado do Rio de Janeiro (UNIRIO) since March 2013 and which objective is to study ways to design strategies of freedom and solidarity by the performative practice. The critical approach of the concept of *Relational Aesthetics* of Bourriaud had already been accomplished on

my previous three-year research project, in which the performance group *Heróis do Cotidiano* [*Everyday Heroes*], which performs micro-utopia actions on the urban area, established a dialogue with the relational aesthetic concept in the streets of Brazil, in order to extend the concept of a Bourriaudian gallery's Relational Aesthetics to a relational art in the streets. In the current project, which builds on the first one, the idea is to investigate the Relational Aesthetics modalities critically, not only in a work of urban/rural intervention, but specifically on projects qualified as *socially engaged art* (SEA). This concept was proposed by the researcher-artist Pablo Helguera to qualify designs that explore the ac/rtivist dimension in a community way, blurring boundaries between social and artistic project, and investigating how the relationships between a specific community and an artist/artistic group can be optimized. In this sense, utopian spaces are created, governed by the values of cooperation, solidarity, encounter, and potentialization of affections, away from the modernity totalizing utopias operating in the daily lives in an ephemeral form, but transforming the everyday into a ritual and making participants reconnected with themselves, the others, the society, and the planet. A first experiment was carried out through the creation and implementation of the performance *Bate-Papo na Cama* [Bed Time Talking], which led me to integrate elements of the Somatic Experiencing (SE), in order to enhance the performance and relationships established by it, creating the concept of *Performance de Arte Relacional como Cura* [Relational Art Performance as Healing (RAPH)]. Based on that experience, I would like to develop some reflections¹.

Within the project, the first step was to investigate different locations and their residents using a bed, installed in public spaces, as a device to hear what people had to say about their cities. Thus, the *Bate-Papo na Cama* was designed as an attempt to understand the modalities of Relational Aesthetics in the streets of Latin America, Central America, and the United States. The first experiment was conducted in partnership with the Colombian artist Alvaro Villalobos in the streets of Niteroi, in front of the Museum of Contemporary Art (MAC) of Rio de Janeiro, in July 2013. In this process, three beds (one for each performer and an additional empty bed) have become a forum for discussion about the gentrification processes

by which the city of Rio de Janeiro was passing in 2013, in a period of preparation for the Soccer World Cup. The video, made by visual artist Lucas Canavarro, was shown in MAC, under the curatorship of Luiz Guilherme Vergara, in an installation where the viewers, while lying in the same beds that had served to make the performance, could hear the voices and see the faces of those who were speaking up about the continuous housing price raising at the time of preparation for the Soccer World Cup and the Olympic Games, bringing the voice of the people who are not usually heard into the space of the Museum². In Mexico City, again in partnership with Alvaro Villalobos, the experiment was repeated with a sofa in the neighborhood where there are many graphics companies. These companies have gone through a series of constant changes in recent years due to the industrialization of printing processes, which are now turning from a silk-screen printing system into a plotting printing system. This movement has created unemployment and constant changes in the processes that once were handmade and artistic, but now are becoming increasingly regulated by technology. The experience of different people - who see themselves becoming a computer programmer instead of being an artist - was recorded in a video, presented between November 2013 and February 2014 in the exhibition called *Eje Grafico Contemporaneo*, in the *Museo de la Ciudad de México*.

Next, the experiment was carried out in several versions during my residence as a professor and a visiting researcher at the California Institute of the Arts (CalArts) by CAPES [Coordination for the Improvement of Higher Education Personnel]/Fulbright, generating four different types of performance / urban intervention, shared at CalArts in a gallery in San Diego and in the Mexican side of the USA/Mexico border in Tijuana, as well at events and contemporary art centers, such as the Art Walk of Los Angeles or the Side Street Project in Pasadena, California. The most recent experiment of public experiences, held in Bailique archipelago, Amapá state, within the *Tecnobarca* project and idealized by Wellington Dias, is to propose artistic experiences for isolated communities along the Amazon River. In this case, the bed was replaced by a hammock installed in the residents' houses of isolated communities, fifteen hours away on boat from the capital of Amapá, Macapá, in order to discuss about plants.

Parallel to this continuity of my art research, I kept performing my SE therapist training at the Brazilian Association of Trauma (ABT – *Associação Brasileira do Trauma*) in Rio de Janeiro, promoting workshops and occasional collaborations with the therapist Alexandre Duarte³. The SE is a technique developed by Peter Levine in the United States, as a result of a multidisciplinary work of psychology, neurosciences, biology, medicine, and Shamanic healing practices and nearly fifty years of clinical experience. The SE aims at alleviating the consequences often unknown of a traumatic conscious or unconsciously shock experienced by the patient, such as invasive medical intervention, robbery, earthquakes, sexual abuse, accident, birth trauma etc. The SE, as conceived by Peter Levine and practiced by Alexandre Duarte, assumes the idea that the trauma is not caused by the event itself, but the momentary inability of the nervous system, the body, and the mind to process this event. Levine's work arises from the observation of wild animals that, although living extremely stressful events, never develop traumas. When an animal is attacked in the jungle, it mobilizes its autonomic nervous system – nonverbal and primitive - to face the danger and, therefore, when safe and sound, it discharges its energy, which is manifested via shakes and spasms by which the animal *discharges* the excess of energy and re-establishes the system flow as a whole. Due to ignorance, fear or shame of bodily reactions and, in technical terms, by the inhibition of the neocortex - the rational mind - the human being usually does not let such discharges happen, which influence the nervous, digestive, and immune systems, leading to behaviors that are the result of not discharging emotions. Rather than opting for a long speech therapy or bringing back a traumatic event often unknown, SE intends to help the patient to self-regulate, re-establishing the energy flow in the body, which leads to increased vitality, added power of life, and an active engagement in life.

Considering that all artistic research is conditioned by intuitive facts, apparent coincidences that escape from systematization, and prior predictability, both researches started to converge when I accomplished the performance for the first time at MAC in Niterói⁴. People lying in bed felt the need to talk about the housing problems, and this conversation - concerning gentrification, removal, social inequality - visibly activated the people's system. Intuitively, I began

to use SE resources with people coming to my bed: once in bed, the person was invited not only to express his/her thoughts, but stay in touch with the bodily sensation that such thoughts or feelings caused, in order to make him/her aware of his/her perceptions and lead to a restaurative default. The activation caused in the body by the talking, when it evokes painful memories, is caused by the sympathetic nervous system, which prepares the body for action, leading to an increase in the heartbeat, a shorter breath, an increased blood pressure, a deviation of the blood from the digestive system to the muscles, dilated pupils, and finally putting the body into a synonym of readiness. When a person taken up into the bed began to manifest such symptoms during the narrative of a flood that had destroyed her home, I tried to guide her to more comfortable bodily sensations and that would allow for a gradual adjustment of the system, which was activated. Focusing on body parts wherein the activation was not prominent, the person was gradually releasing muscle tension, relaxing until crying a little bit. When she left the bed, after the somatic therapy session outdoors, the person was in a completely different state, very grateful and pleased. By having this kind of experiences during the performance, I left a curiosity open, but not to the point of taking the performance - as the Finishing School group in Psychic Barber, held in October 2013 in Los Angeles - as a therapy in an assumed way. At that particular moment there was a curious combination of two directions of my work, my research, and training, linked to the desire to work the Relational Aesthetics within a mutual healing dimension of both the performer and the participant.

The second experiment was performed during the first experiment of the *Bate-Papo na Cama* at CalArts, California. In the North American context, the need for therapeutic relaxation in bed was strong and forceful due to contextual reasons and a marketing error, which led the Leimert Park community leader, to whom I presented the project to disclose to the community that there would be offered free therapy in bed in a public space. Thus, all participants who showed up - a fact that I did not know - were already waiting for a therapy session. This experience made me think beyond Pablo Helguera's *socially engaged art* concept, with which I was working and that applies to projects that would indistinctly be social projects

or artistic projects; it also led me to think, while preparing my work in projects where the therapeutic dimension would be as important as the social and aesthetic dimension: in short, in projects that erase boundaries between therapy / social action / artistic action, deepening the relationships in order to transform the performance on a healing instance. I am calling these border experiences RAPH (Relational Art Performance as Healing), an operative concept to assist the understanding of these phenomena approaching the performance as a healing process through relational devices driven by a performer / therapist.

Before entering the deepening of this part of the process, some words about the contextual reasons for the experience in the United States are necessary. For a *contextual art* (Ardenne, 2004, n.p.) - whether therapeutic or not - the North American context is very different from the Brazilian context. The implicit subtext of the North American context is generated by the need to be active all the time. Within the American way of life, the time spent for doing nothing and integrating concepts, experiences, readings - that is, the expected time in the active planning for emptying the body and mind - is extremely short. Within the frenetic pace imposed by the North American life, and more specifically the School of Arts where I worked as a teacher, researcher, and guest artist, the pace is intense. Within the framework of a school which is open twenty-four hours a day, students come into such an accelerated rhythm that they find it hard to regulate themselves and find internal peace and satisfaction. The feeling of being late has always been one of the main complaints I heard when I was talking in bed inside the CalArts or even at informal meetings with the students. The bed, accordingly, proposed an alternative for resting, relaxing, comfort, and intimacy within a culture of very little physical contact and in which all eye contact already has as characteristic of constituting as a threat in a form of seduction. In this case, the main work was leading the person to a relaxation by activating the perception of sensation and discharge. When the autonomic nervous system is stuck in an overactive mode, hyperactivity, panic, anger or manias can be noticed, which becomes very evident in the small bed sharing space. Thus, the process is about helping the person renegotiating with the moment when the system froze. As Peter Levine, founder of the SE, said:

The structure of trauma, including hyperactivation, dissociation and freezing, is based on the behavioral developments of survival of the predator / prey. Symptoms of the trauma are the result of an incomplete biological response to the threat that is frozen in time. The trauma may be renegotiated when the freezing response is supported and can defrost and finish the act interrupted (Levine, 1999, p. 12).

The performance was held for the first time in an enclosed space (room C108) at the school, dialoguing with the idea of rest and integrating elements of surveillance culture observed over the months of living in Los Angeles. Rather than proposing a space for resting and exchange only – as it was the case when the experiment was held in Mexico or Brazil - an intimate rest space was offered in California, to talk about love and loneliness as a moment that could foster self-regulation. To do justice to the North American reality, however, the conversations were always amplified by microphone and projected in the room while Manuel Lima, a Brazilian doctorate student at CalArts, improvised on the piano, playing with the various tones of the conversation and creating different melodies that could emphasize, contradict or generate something other than the room climate; the live image of intimate conversation was projected on the wall, and color casts were made on them, conveying the idea that any private space in Los Angeles becomes public, media made, and supervised, demonstrating how complex it is to seek moments of relaxation within a framework conditioned by the continuous search for efficiency. According to Zygmunt Bauman, quoted by Nato Thompson (2012): "Public space is not much more than a giant screen on which private worries are projected without, in the course of magnification, ceasing to be private" (2001, p. 107). The impossibility of meeting in public space with time and intimacy was materialized by the performance itself. In Los Angeles, the feeling of surveillance is also constant, and thus the whole conversation with students, administrative technicians or professors could or could not be extended, such as all image could or not be projected, providing a contradictory space where intimacy and freedom, privacy and publicity, comforting and uncomfortable, therapy and coercion coexisted.



Picture 2 - *Bed Time Talking* with Manuel Lima. CalArts, Los Angeles, California, 2013. Photo: Manuel Lima.

For the second North American experience, the chosen space was a community of African-Americans in the Crenshaw district. Located at the southern part of the city, the Crenshaw district is considered the center of African-American culture in Los Angeles, as well as the largest African-American community of the whole western part of the United States. The performance was integrated into a larger event, entitled *Art Walk*, in which the community shares its artwork: jazz, slam, rap, and also crafts such as statues, masks, paintings, sculptures, and clothes that make a parade of musicians with drums. By carrying out the experience there, the importance of adapting the artwork to the most diverse contexts was realized, and the performance had been released by the event organizer as a *therapy in bed*, directly entering in the field of RAPH. As we read in the book *Living as Form*, edited by Nato Thompson and written by various artists:

For some artists, the desire to make art that is living stems from the desire for something breathing, performative and action-based. Participation, sociality and the organization of bodies in space play a key feature in much of this work. Perhaps in reaction to the steady state of mediated two-dimensional cultural production, or the reaction to the alienating effects of spectacle, artists, activists, citizens

and advertisers alike are rushing headlong into methods of working which allow genuine interpersonal human relationships to develop. The call for art into life at this particular moment in history implies both urgency to matter as well as the privileging of the lived experience (Thompson, 2012).

In this case, when we started the performance, there were rap improvisations in the room, and the first reflex was to incorporate them to the performance. Thus, during the performance, rappers came lying in bed and answered to the conversations singing and improvising with a microphone, while others played instruments and danced around the bed. The effective transforming element in the performance, however, was the fact that the performance was disclosed orally to the community as a *therapy in bed*. After the first person called me as a therapist explicitly, I decided to really practice therapy sessions in bed, revisiting, deterritorializing, and reterritorializing Freud's theories. Held in a community space with free access to the community, the performance added homeless people, requiring the spontaneous participation of artists who transformed the community space into a public space. According to Carol Becker, "The engagement is the only antidote to the show. And the reinvention of public space is the only antidote to its disappearance." (Thompson, 2012, p. 71). In this case, as referred by Guattari, an experience of an innovative therapy was performed:

A huge reconstruction of social gears is necessary to face the CMI wreckage. This reconstruction involves less the reform of domes, laws, decrees, bureaucratic programs than the promotion of innovative practices, the dissemination of alternative experiences, centered on singling and permanent work at subjectivity production, which acquires autonomy and meanwhile articulates to the rest of society (Guattari, 2012, p. 44)⁵.



Image 3 – *Bed Time Talking*, Art Walk, Los Angeles, California, 2013. Photo: Manuel Lima.

These practices challenge the limits of social or just aesthetic project, entering the field of therapy, requiring from the performer the ability to navigate from the therapeutic field to the artistic field, resetting every time the power of artistic destabilizing experience and artistic healing experience and vice versa. Devices generated by relational practice, in this case the bed, are then activated with a therapeutic perspective, to promote a transformation of the relationship between participant and performer in search for healing, understood as release of trauma and regulation of the autonomous nervous system: the RAPH. Following the intuition of a definite blurring of boundaries between art, therapy, and social project in this work, the third experiment was carried out on the border between San Diego and Tijuana. While crossing the boundary between the cities with the inflatable bed in the backpack and put it on the Mexican side, in the bridge, the project consisted of asking the people on the Mexican side what they had to say to the people of the US side. In the performance held at San Ysidro Gallery, in the North American side, it was also always asked in bed to the people in the North American side what they would like to tell to the people in the Mexican side. As explained by Peter Levine in the chapter *Transforming the Cultural Trauma*, all forms of repeated violence - whether physical or economic - between nations attach them. "By using the ability of the human body to register a peaceful vivacity, even amongst traumatic defensiveness, all of us can begin to make our communities safe for us and our children" (Levine, 1993, p. 199). In this sense, individual therapy was extended to a collective

therapy, trying to establish links between two cultures and beyond prejudices settled in residents from both sides of the border.

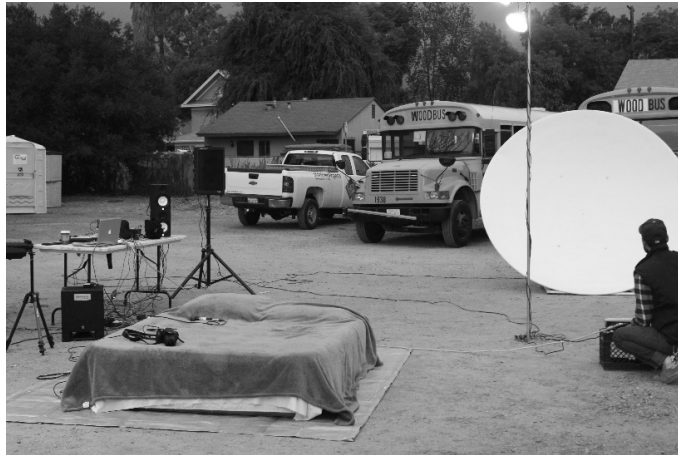


Image 4 – *Bed Time Talking*, with Manuel Lima. Side Street Project, Los Angeles, California, 2014. Photo: Tania Alice.

The fourth experience mixing the three instances was held at the *Side Street Project* in Pasadena. Founded in 1992 by Karen Atkinson and Joe Luttrell, the Side Street Project is a mobile structure, self-managed by artists, which aims to conduct socially engaged art projects in various communities and facilitate access to contemporary art projects for communities. The purpose of the non-profit association is to help facilitate projects that deal with complex public negotiations, more than making art objects, providing various types of support for conceptual public art projects. In this project, conducted in partnership with Manuel Pessoa de Lima, we decided to take the radical nature of the show experience proposed by the city of Los Angeles, combining it with the therapeutic experience. In this experiment, the tension between private and public, noticeable in the city of Los Angeles and the United States as a whole, was the core of performance: by operating a friction between the intimacy of the public space, where the person abandons his/her inherent vertical power to enter into an intimate dimension provided by horizontality, the performance created at the same time, a dimension of invasion of privacy by the live projections. A giant satellite antenna as a projection surface in live stream, a continuous vocal amplification in the space, a grandstand for spectators – from which they could hear and watch the images of people in the bed projected onto the screen - and projectors fixed on poles were a true film set, in which viewers could watch the spectacle of intimate conversations. While meetings were

broadcasted live by speakers located at various corners of the bed, the performer/composer Manuel Lima improvised an atmosphere and music on the piano, and each musical note projected at the same time colored interference in the black and white projection. Mutual supply created between atmospheres and conversations generated a different performative activity: not only the conversations inspired the performer / composer to create sounds and visual images, but the images and sounds designed to illustrate, contradict or create irony influenced the conversations in the bed. The visual and comfortable atmosphere of the bed, along with the coldness, led to moments in which five people together, lying on the bed and embraced, exchanged memories of love stories that had influenced and guided their lives. Tears, cheers, and hugs created a real intimate space, while a sound and visual projection remembered the reality of constant observation lived in the city. In this context, there was an unexpected report of a participant, an ex-veteran of Vietnam War: he found in bed the space to report the day when a bomb fell into the building where he was. In this case, the reporting sound was amplified to all square, showing the horrors of war waged by the United States to the communities of Mexican immigrants present there. The therapeutic role in this case was to listen and lead gradually to the narrator a sense of security provided by the bed in a public space, with five participants embraced in the heat, looking at the full moon, at the same time restoring a link between Mexican and American communities. The paradox of the experience stood in the fact that, motivated by the need of the report and the intimacy of the bed - just as happens in social networks and in the North American society - the participants forgot the projections, leaving the public / private tension only visible to passers-by / spectators.



Image 5 - *Bed Time Talking*, San Diego/Tijuana, California/Baja California, 2013. Photo: Manuel Lima.

I would like to conclude by describing the last experience of the I, held in the Amazon, in a hammock during the *Tecnobarca* project - *Artistic Residences*, and where all construction was annulled, having acquired different contours. This project of residences, which occurred at fifteen hours by boat from Macapá, led me to a relativization of the concepts of urban intervention, performance, socially engaged art, and even the SE. Within small communities, sometimes five or six houses where we stayed during the day to accomplish the socially engaged art projects, there was no need to undo trauma, to relax, to create practices that would stop any flow or generate micro-utopias. All general purposes that were thought when designing an urban intervention suddenly became unnecessary, since the facts that the residents of large urban centers regularly point out - such as lack of time, lack of poetry, lack of relationship etc. - are not problems in small communities along the Amazon. On the contrary, the simple life that people live - with difficulties that are totally different from urban concerns - led me to think about what we define as urgency and needs within the social/artistic/therapeutic project and to think that we only alleviate the trauma that our urban lives generate. During this period of calm and retreat, navigating for hours in the middle of the Amazon River, I have learned more than I taught. And I realized, mainly, that there are places where our arts and therapies, in the urban way we think and conceive, may not be necessary. There are places where we can disappear. In the Amazonian

context, the concept of artistic/therapeutic and social project literally will just go down. I dove deep and forgot everything I had learned. And once back to Macapá, in a morning when the sun rose over the Amazon River – such as after a SE session or a performance – I rose again and looked at the world. It was full of possibilities.



Image 6 - *Bate-Papo na Rede*, Tecnobarca project, Bailique Archipelago/AP, 2014. Photo: Ítala Isis.



Notes

¹ After the first phase of *Bed Time Talking* in public spaces, I am currently performing the project in private spaces (galleries), staying for twelve straight hours in bed and receiving visitors. This has been done at Gruntaler9 (Berlin), Friche La Belle de Mai (Marseille), Glasshouse Art Life Lab (New York), and Wolke (Brussels).

² Video presented at the MAC. Available at: <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gwygChwKZOU>>.

³ For more information about Alexandre Duarte's work, see: <<http://www.aleduarte.org>>.

⁴ In this article I choose not to give in to the temptation to provide coherence *a posteriori* to the experience, but to take the procedural character of the experience, with its uncertainties, mistakes, successes, and productive coincidences.

⁵ Guattari defines the CMI as the Integrated World Capitalism.

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