

On the margins of art:

The crossover between aesthetic experimentation, clinical actions and political participation in Brazil

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INTRODUCTION

In his text “Pratiques écosophiques et restauration de la Cité subjective” (1992) Felix Guattari says that the contemporary human being is fundamentally deterritorialized. Its existential territories – body, domestic space, religion – are no longer attached to firm ground but hold on to a world of precarious representations and perpetual movement. Everything circulates nowadays, but only to stay in the same place, since everything is interchangeable. Thus, subjectivity is in danger of becoming petrified. We have lost the passion for difference; at the same time great distress destroys us.

To struggle against the contemporary sickness that for Guattari affects all spheres of life – subjective, relational and environmental – and threatens the very future of life on the planet, we must search out our weapons. Where can we find the weapons for the extensive reformulation that is needed? In, among others, the strategies of resistance that are being forged everywhere and embodied in transcultural territories. As both Guattari and Rolnik (2008) offer, in order to cure this almost petrified subjectivity it would be necessary to prescribe poetry the way we prescribe vitamins. Poetry is very close to the production of a certain kind of health. In Brazil there is a long tradition of crossovers between cultural production and health practices. At the end of the 19th century the writer Machado de Assis said: “Art is the medicine. The best of them all”. In the first decades of the last century, while writer Mário de Andrade was publishing a book called “Namoros com a Medicina” (Dating with medicine), the psychiatrist Osório César was organizing the Free School of Fine Art at the heart of a Psychiatric Hospital, and artist Flavio de Carvalho stated that “the only worthy art is abnormal art”. Later, the psychiatrist Nise da Silveira stimulated and produced the first performance of Artaud in Brasil, in a psychiatric hospital, and art critic Mário Pedrosa developed the idea that the main purpose of persistent and systematic artistic endeavour was not the production of masterpieces – the most important thing was what was acquired in the making, the impact of the activity upon one’s life. (Lima and Pelbart, 2007)

Following this line of force, that inscribes its trajectory on the margins of art, I would like to approach the idea of radical imagination, introducing into the relation between art and politics, a clinical dimension.

HÉLIO OITICICA: invention, body and environment

It was in this hybrid inheritance that Hélio Oiticica rooted his poetics, provoking important deterritorialisations in the field of Brazilian and International art. (Lima, 2009) Oiticica belongs to a generation of Brazilian artists which, in the 50’s and 60’s, proposed opening the aesthetic field to the actions of life. What gave shape to his aesthetic trajectory was the solution of an ethical and political problem: the liberation of men from their internal and external co-actions and the experimental exercise of freedom.

Hélio understood that it was necessary to build environments in order to enable us to experiment with the potency of creation. The artist’s intention was not to privilege or determine the meaning of a space, but leave it open for the construction of meaning through interaction. Here, the tangible structures exist to propose, not a vision of the world, but the construction of each one’s world, with the elements of a singularity that finds precisely there, the reasons to manifest itself.

The propositions and environments he invented not only act in the visible reality but also operate as transformations in sensible [sensory? sensorial?] reality and give expression to something that is still formless, but traverses the body as a force. According to Hélio, the attempt to create propositions that enlarge the sensible [sensory? sensorial?] capacities and the investment in its relational quality are associated with social, ethical and political arguments. In this environmental art nothing

is excluded, from social criticism to the penetration of borderline situations. New sensibilities, new ways of feeling, thinking and searching are established.

The challenge consists in reactivating, on the part of the receptors, their power to be affected by encounters with the world, lending these encounters the quality of an aesthetic experience. In this sense, the artist's research developed towards generating transformation where the vital flux of an individual or an entire society becomes impeded or obstructed, that which is essential for the collective health and the health of each one. We find in operation here, a politics of the body that is also immediately clinical: liberation of the individual, enlargement of the sensible [sensory? sensorial?] capacities, experimentation.

A permanent ethical questioning traverses this politics of the body. Spinozian ethics is based on research on what a body is capable of, with regard to the capacity of the body to be affected and organize encounters in its transit through the world. The body, invited to the gesture and the rhythm, opens up to the discovery of the creation process. However this discovery isn't simply limited to the individual body: as Hélio offers, "the discovery of the body tribalises". (Oiticica, 1998: 232)

The body's primary protection, the skin, starts to increase towards a collective protection, which is not only the sum of the individual skins, but the global shelter. "With this a journey back to the world took place, a re-emergence of an interest for things, for human problems, for life (...) it is a process in society, in practical life, in the objective world, in the subjective experience". (Oiticica, 1986: 95)

In living and relating with a community at Morro da Mangueira, in Rio de Janeiro, Hélio finds a world where survival depends on paying close attention to life's possibilities. The encounter between the artist and the community positioned both reciprocally in a becoming movement. Inventing tools for individual and collective survival and for the overcoming of our condition of misery and poverty, Hélio devises escape lines for the impasses of contemporary life and dreams of a new world. Nevertheless, along with dreaming new worlds, Hélio creates new ones within everyday social spaces. The worlds he creates are virtual, but no less real, and can be experimented with, developed.

In a letter to his friend Guy Brett, Hélio talks about his Barracão Project:

"I feel that the Idea (...) grows according to the needs of a new community, based on creative affinities, regardless of cultural or intellectual differences, even social or individual differences. I'm not talking about a community to "make works of art", but something as a living experiment – every type of experiment we could develop in a new sense of life and society – a kind of environment constructed for life in itself, based on the idea that creative energy inhabits everyone. (...) It would be an open space, an environment for any conceivable or imaginable form of creative experiment". (Oiticica, 1992: 135)

PACTO: encounters between artistic practices and production of health

This image Hélio constructed at the end of the 1960s seems to have been activated in many experimental practices in Brazil today. One such practice, with which I have been working since 1995, where researchers, OTs, artists and students initiated an experience at the University of São Paulo, one we could in many ways call a borderer [very rare; bordering?] one. The practice established neighboring zones (Raunig, 2008) between social, cultural and clinical practice, providing group spaces for experimentation in art and body activities for people in a position or state of particular vulnerability.

Words like creative process, body experimentation, participation and conviviality were involved in the proposal, based on the principles of transversality we called the Artistic Composition and Occupational Therapy Program (PACTO). In this program we are thrown into the sphere of cultural production, into meeting people, and making things together; in short, building a common world.

Some of the material and non-material outcomes of these experiments remain within the limits of the clinical space. They are like aesthetic fragments or performances that cannot be reproduced. However, some of these outcomes transverse the thin layer that separates them from cultural production and assume a presence in a wider collective space. When crossing this line and connecting with mainstream cultural forms of expression, these dissident forms gain a certain strength in

the existing power relationships (Guattari & Rolnik, 1986). On the other hand, they hold in check the limits that exist between art and non-art, and between art and life.

In this sense, micro and macropolitical actions play a role here.

Working with people's various possibilities and their needs for expression; finding together with them ways of develop the lines in their lives; confronting together the point at which our vital movement is interrupted; affirming and activating our power to be affected; and giving expression to sensible [sensory?] realities that traverse our bodies, we are producing collectively a fragile and irresistible health (Deleuze, 1997) and acting in the micropolitical dimension.

At the same time, we are faced with macropolitics. When people outside the art system produce culture and introduce their works into the field of art, they escape from the place they are supposed to be confined and create a scene in the common world, acting out a re-distribution of the sensible. For Jacques Rancière (2006), the distribution of the sensible allows us to see who takes part in the common world in conformity with the activities performed and defines for each the fact of being visible or invisible, of being gifted (or not) with a voice in the shared space. There is politics when there is action changing the distribution of the sensible, muddling codes, defining new competencies in the shared space, altering the *modus operandi* of art practice, reclaiming 'aesthetics' from its current narrow confines to reveal its significance for contemporary experience and introducing new individuals into the art field.

FINAL CONSIDERATIONS

In Brazil, numerous practices like this have effectuated threads set loose by Hélio Oiticica. (Braga, 2008) On November 2009, in Rio de Janeiro, the celebration of "Loucos pela Diversidade" (Crazy about Diversity) took place, an award sponsored by the Ministry of Culture and the Ministry of Health in Brazil. At the event, prizes were awarded to artists and autonomous groups that have developed aesthetic practices, usually under extremely precarious conditions, and in confrontation with psychological suffering and adversity. (Hélio would say: "from adversity we live".) Some 40 artists and autonomous groups invaded the Brazilian cultural arena, innovated in the lingua franca, and put in check [challenged?] the currently valid distribution scheme of the sensible.

Each of these artists and collectives connects to the surroundings in a cooperative way, opening space up for the encounter and the creative experience and establishing ways of resistance against the isolation and rootlessness characteristic of the contemporary world. They construct devices that effect transitions between art, clinics and politics, and create the prospect of a cooperative social bond through people's reciprocal recognition and enrichment, one that does not disregard the multiplicity of their stories, their knowledge and capacities, their singularity. They invent other spaces, heterotopias, as Foucault (2001) would say, kinds of utopias effectively built.

What we start to realize with these experiences is that madness and precariousness can become bio-political forces. In connection with aesthetic practices it deserts the field of illness to compose itself as bio-potency.

Health – its fragility and its potency both – may be found in the contemporary world in those and in other practices that seek to escape from the established state of things. They affirm life's quality of indetermination, its capacity to re-invent itself, take new shape and become qualified. Life as bios, where the biological component/fact cannot be separated from the cultural, historical, aesthetic, economic and political dimensions; life that, in its diversity, cannot be considered separate from the countless ways of living.

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