

Artistic Exchange Between Japan and Brazil

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In his classic book *The Savage Mind*, Claude Levi-Strauss has explained that even cultures which are in close proximity to one another often end up constructing systems which are entirely different, from elements which are basically very similar or, in fact, almost identical. The creation of a culture is a long-term process beset with hazards and with numerous minor intermediate decisions that may well result in the creation of a certain style, a certain philosophy or, indeed, a particular way of looking at the world. A culture functions like a living organism and this is the reason why it is always trying to open frontiers in order to survive.

This metaphor suggested by Levi-Strauss to understand culture as a “living organism,” was deeply explored by interdisciplinary studies crossing the borderlines between culture and natural sciences in order to conclude that all communication systems are not just dynamic but adaptive; they are self-regulated to suit both the external context (conditions of the environment) and the internal context (circumstances inherent within the system itself). Context has been employed differently by various investigators but, broadly speaking, the term has been understood as a whole range of cognitive systems (mind), information flow, memory of prior experiences and, no doubt, the anticipation of future possibilities not yet implemented.

In different contexts, nothing is intrinsically meaningful, it is interpreted to be so. That is why it is so difficult to deal with the idea of globalization due to the fact that the global is always global according to a certain point of view. It never means everybody, everywhere.

According to the Indian scholar Homi Bhabha the discussion on globalization must always begin at home. We should first evaluate how globalizing nations deal with the difference within—the problems of diversity and redistribution at the local level, and the rights and representations of minorities in the regional domain. The in-house hegemonies provide us with useful perspectives on the predatory effects of global governance however philanthropic the original intention might have been.

In the seminar organized in 2007 at the Art Institute of Chicago by art critic James Elkins, Inaga Shigemi pointed out that Art History, for example, always means Western Art History, and it refers specifically to certain affiliations connected to the centres of power and production of knowledge. Therefore, when a scholar mentions an Eastern culture, and we can say even African or Latin American culture, the conception of art is immediately connected to ethnic or traditional experiences such as the Japanese ukiyo-e, Latin American arts and crafts, African carving and so on. The same occurs when someone applies for a scholarship. In a general sense, a particular project will be understood and analyzed according to “universal” parameters. Contemporary experiences from some countries outside the scope of the centres of knowledge and cultural production (sometimes mentioned as “the rest of the world”) can be recognized only as a result of external influences organized under specific categories. That is why we often see bibliographical references such as the “Japanese avant-garde,” “African post-modernism” or “Brazilian post-structuralism.” It does not

matter if specific cultural experiences came from different references and ask for specific conceptualization. To be visible in the globalized world they must be under universal rules and paradigms. The problem is that in order to be included, these experiences turn to be excluded, as they lose their singularity. That is why the main subject of this discussion on cultural exchanges becomes deeply connected to the process of representation or representation of the “other.”

Looking closer to the dialogue between Japan and Brazil, there are different possibilities of understanding representational processes. By bringing this discussion to the movement of the human body in dance, I would like to propose that cultural dialogues be understood in multiple levels of description, depending on the construction of the different types of representation. In a primary attempt to organize some experiences I have observed in the last years, I propose three strategies¹ to translate one culture to another:

I will start with the most popular: the symbolic one. A symbol is an arbitrary and conventional sign—an intellectual operation. However, it can also be an indirect method of representation based on comparison. The common element between a symbol and what it represents is often concealed and the interpretation of symbols is always a process of translation.

There are several ways of working with cultural translations in a symbolic way. A costume or a scenic element, for example, can be recognized as a symbolic sign, like a kimono and other scenic elements in Suzana Yamauchi’s choreographic solos. She had never been to Japan when she created “À Flor da pele” (On the surface)—a first solo experience to retrieve her Japanese roots. In addition to the use of symbolic elements, the movement itself can also be a symbol when it turns to be a sort of convention, a gesture deeply imprinted by a specific cultural manifestation, such a *noh kata* (movement) or a *kabuki mie* (stance). Another example is a piece called “They told me I was Japanese.” It is a choreography mixed with video presentations, created by Leticia Sekito, who, similarly to Yamauchi, had neither been to Japan nor studied with a Japanese master. She was inspired by Japanese pop, as usually viewed on TV, electronic games, movies, on her search for a contemporary Japan. In her show, these images take on a symbolic representations in the body of the artist as a doll, a pop star, cartoon characters, etc.

The second possibility of representation is based on indexation. In this case, the thing (idea, movement, image, etc.) and its representation are contiguous, which means that the index is affected by the object supposed to be represented and it necessarily has some characteristics in common with this object. Therefore, the index is a representation that refers to its object not only because it is associated with general characteristics which that object has (this is the symbolic representation), but because it is a dynamical connection both with the individual object, on the one hand, and with the senses of memory of the person to whom it serves as a sign, on the other hand. The nearness creates an association by contiguity not by an intellectual operation (as symbols do). This means it directs the attention at their objects by “blind compulsion.” It is a kind of

metonymy or replacement of an entity by its indexes. Concerning Japanese art, a good example is the timing of the corporal movements, the use of space, and the traces of the training of the body. In this sense, I can think about Angela Nagai and Alice K. and their experiences, inspired by the Japanese theatre (especially the *noh* and the *kyōgen*), and also Emilie Sugai and Kusuno Takao, pioneers of *butoh* dance in Brazil. Nagai and Alice K. studied in Japan for two years and continued working after returning to São Paulo, which means in the last ten years. Sugai danced with Kusuno (Japanese immigrant) for eight years. Therefore, all of them have a significant incorporated experience with Japanese corporal art training. When we look at their work, the aforementioned “blind compulsion” can be noticed and even though they do not necessarily look for a true representation to any given form, their bodies follow a reference of perception and mode as practised in Japan (or with a Japanese master) and later tested individually in Brazil.

Another way of representation is the iconic representation. It works by empathy or similarity between the sign and its object. It only signifies by its own quality, in contrast to the index and the symbol. Indeed, a pure icon should be almost a “non-communicative sign” because an iconic representation is not something that you are able to learn, like corporal training or the architectural design of a stage. It is something that already exists as a “possibility” and can only be recognized and shared, but not necessarily understood. It happens when someone is able to present in its own body the similar feeling of another person. The aesthetical results of researchers can be completely different, as they are not looking for similar and visible indexes or symbols. They are only attached by similar primary metaphors,² an experience subjectively connected to a sensorial-motor action that can trigger a process of creation of movement. In this particular case, similarities are not necessarily visible in the artistic products or results, but they concern the control structures within the brains and the bodies, as I mentioned before, a sort of empathic experience.³ It could also be formulated as the very core of subjectivity which means the possibility for life to be constantly invented and reinvented as intensity modes and not only as a personal subject.

To better understand iconic representations it is important to recognize that whenever a domain of subjective experience is co-activated regularly in a sensorial-motor domain, connections are inevitably established. In this case, the particular aspect of an artistic experience concerning cultural exchanges is the potentiality of the actions. Indeed, the iconic representation is the immediate presentation of a sensation. This can be observed, for example, through the empathic experience between Brazilian choreographer Marta Soares and Japanese artist Hijikata Tatsumi. Marta Soares’ experience has an empathic connection with Hijikata’s *butoh* in the sensation of a body in crisis. She is not discussing a particular image or gesture, she did not follow his physical training (the *butoh-fū* methodology), but she is exploring a similar “physical state,” related to radical internal alterations, as in her choreographies *O Banho, 2004* (The Bath) and *O Homen de Jasmim, 2000* (The Jasmine Man), amongst others.

Of course, all the different levels of representation that I have mentioned are not necessarily unconnected. It is important to observe that no matter which representational strategy is used, the experience is always absolutely singular. The most stereotyped work can be unique in some sense, even though all the political connotations have been lost and all gestures have become a cliché. As Homi Bhabha pointed out, the terms of cultural engagement, whether antagonistic or affiliate, are produced in a performatic way. Representation of the difference must not be interpreted as reflection of pre-given ethnic or cultural traits set in fixed parameters of tradition. Social articulation of the difference is a complex on-going negotiation that seeks to authorize cultural hybrid ties that emerge in moments of historical transformation. The frontiers of these cultural differences may be consensual or in conflict. They may confound our definitions of tradition and modernity; realign the customary boundaries between the private and the public, high and low; and challenge normative expectations of development and progress. In this sense, the representational process is a mean to bring together a whole context and its gestures as the exhibition of a modality.

To intensify this idea, Giorgio Agamben's hypothesis is that the gesture is "the communication of a communicability." It has not necessarily something to say, to be decoded (as a symbol) or to be referred to (as an index). It can just show the fact of "being within the human language as pure potentiality" (as an icon.)

As Charles Darwin concluded in the 19th century when he wrote on the birth of the species, language ability is not different from the instinctive tendency to acquire an art. Therefore, we can say there are many different ways to travel and to experience cultural exchange between Japan and Brazil. Basic activities such as to speak in another language or to use different gestures can be the way to give visibility to the "others" within ourselves.

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NOTES

- 1 This proposition is based on the work of Charles Sanders Peirce (1839–1914), considered the founder of the modern theory of signs. He proposed a system, developed through a phenomenology base of three universal categories called firstness, secondness, and thirdness. Firstness is the mode of being as such as it is, without reference to anything else. It is the category of the non reflected feeling, mere potentiality, freedom, immediacy. Secondness involves the relation of a first to a second. It is the category of comparison, facticity, action and reaction, reality, and experience in time and space. Thirdness brings the second to a third. It is the category of mediation, habit, memory, synthesis, communication and symbolic representation.
- 2 A primary metaphor occurs through a correlation between a sensorial-motor action and a subjective experience. This is not only necessarily related to artists and artistic processes. Human beings inevitably acquire an enormous range of primary metaphors just by going out into the world, constantly moving and perceiving.
- 3 According to Antonio Damasio, the brain can simulate certain emotional body status internally, as it happens in the process of turning the emotion of sympathy into a feeling of empathy. Think, for example, of being told about a horrible accident in which someone was badly injured. For a moment you may feel a twinge of pain that mirrors in your mind the pain of the person in question. The mechanism producing this sort of feeling is the “as-if-body-loop.” It involves an internal brain simulation which produces a rapid alteration of ongoing bodily mappings. The mirror neurons are responsible for this effect. In summary, the body-sensing areas are a sort of theatre where not only the “actual” body status can be performed but “false” body status can be enacted as well.