



PERFORMANCE
PHILOSOPHY

DIARY OF A COLONIAL DIARRHEA: TRYING TO JUSTIFY THE UNJUSTIFIABLE

RODRIGO BATISTA INDEPENDENT ARTIST

I see you making mistakes and it isn't a sin,
apart from when it makes other people bleed
I see you dreaming of and it frightens
Lost in a world that doesn't allow to get in
You are getting out of my life
and it seems to take a long time
If you cannot return, at least send news
You think I'm crazy
But everything's gonna be right
I'M ENJOYING EACH SECOND
BEFORE IT BECOME A TRAGEDY

"On your shelf"
Pitty, female Brazilian rock star

This essay is a process of capturing an experience that, although individual, may also speak to the practices of others. It is an essay resulting from a process of artistic reflection condemned by the neoliberal ties of individualism and the boycott of collective and decentralized thoughts. It is a diary of colonial diarrhea, generated by centuries-old bad meals, seasoned with Patriarchy, White Supremacy, and the maintenance of hegemonies that continue to explode entire digestive systems, killing cultures and exposing rotten intestines on hygienic screens for consumption 24/7.

First Shit: Innocence and Good Intentions

Hell is full of good intentions

Popular saying

I arrived in Europe, in Amsterdam, almost five years ago in 2016. The two years that preceded and motivated my immigration were filled with macro and micro political social destruction. One of them, of a macro-political nature, was the collapse of democracy (or the revelation that the concept of democracy never existed for countries like mine): through a coup d'état led by the Brazilian centre-right, guided by US Institutions and disseminated by the Brazilian bourgeois media, Brazil's first female president is expelled from office (Rousseff 2019). The absurdity of the ease with which democracy is destroyed is overwhelming. Democracy has failed. Representation becomes a flawed concept, an appealing lie.

The second destruction was of a micro-political nature: a strike by art educators in the Artistic-Pedagogical Program "Fábricas de Cultura," in the community of Capão Redondo, on the outskirts of the South Zone of São Paulo, of which I was an active part (Pina 2016). This was a strike, without the support of unions, led by educators and students, which lasted more than three months and had on its agenda the repudiation of racist and misogynistic dismissals in the months before, in addition to demanding the reopening of the public library that was closed by the Institution responsible for the Program. It was a strike built on radical thinking in solidarity with colleagues who had been fired for somber reasons, precisely because there was a certainty that we would all be fired after such a powerful protest. We were all fired when the strike ended, as we had expected. The students, who were occupying the Program building, were imprisoned as criminals for two days. It was the end of the democratic farce.

So my arrival in Europe was fraught with the fundamental political issues that 2016 presented to me: the birth of a new type of macro-authoritarianism and the desire for insurrection and resistance in the micro-sphere. With this feeling and with the help of several references, I built the show "The Furious Rodrigo Batista," a performative work that puts my body at the centre of such frustrations and desires.¹ It is a show about Brazil, with the well-intentioned desire to denounce: as if presenting such a show on European ground would bring some significant change to the situation in Brazil (Batista 2018). This is an illusion fueled by European and North American neoliberal activism in which the artist/curator is placed as a possible saviour of such situations, while at the same time producing intrinsically narcissistic self-promotion of themselves in the spotlight of fame (and personal profit).



*Figure 1: The Furious Rodrigo Batista (Side A) (2018).
Photo: Alessandro Sala. Courtesy of Centrale Fies, in the frame of Live Works vol6.*

When I performed the show, bleeding from my ass, in front of the European audience, I felt weirdly violated, because the political impotence of my work was triggered by the consumerist and fetishizing pleasure that I managed to capture from the audience: the consumption of “my” misery, which was not mine, since I was denouncing police violence against black Brazilian youth, which I am not a part of. The consumerist pleasure of the misery put on stage also revealed a hypocritical game of pity and non-belonging; that is, in the end, the feeling that remained was that all the gore presented on stage could only concern this country far away from Europe, called Brazil.

From this desperation to turn my practice into something that could have direct implications for European audiences, I turned to the idea of making a “B side” of the work carried out in my first year in Europe. For that, I tried to bring this continent to the centre of the discussion, making a play that could confront the contemporary colonial state to which we all belong (Batista 2019).

At the end of my research trajectory, I organically understood that the two works were really just one: divided into “Side A” (pornography of Brazilian poverty) and “Side B” (confrontation with contemporary colonialism). Presenting the work in different contexts, its relevance is confirmed by a market need that is very present in European theatre festivals: the need to see an immigrant alone on stage talking badly about his own country and/or blaming Europe for the misfortunes of the world.



Figure 2: The B-side (2019). Photo: Thomas Leden.

Personally, this market situation depresses me.

What is the real political impact that such an artistic genre can provoke to change what the work itself denounces? Or is hypocrisy something inherent to the work of the artist/curator fragmented by immigration processes? Does the political nature of the contemporary art market impose itself as a narcissistic desire of the artist/curator to be on the “right side of history”? Why?

Second shit: the poverty pornography

It is during the XIXth century that the paradigms of a setting in a standard of the world are elaborated, on the old and the new continent, whose visible part deviates at the same time a popular spectacle, a scientific lesson of things (through the emergence of the learned societies) and an explicit demonstration of the validity of the colonial hierarchies or the racial distinctions. As we progressively leave—with the abolitions—the time of slavery and enter the time of empires, the world order is organized between those who were exhibited and those who were spectators of the exhibitions.

Blanchard et al. (2002)

To try to answer some of these questions, I look to the work of the Dutch artist Renzo Martens, who decides to go to Congo to teach the communities there to profit from their misery. Renzo holds several photography workshops with Congolese people trying to convince them to sell the

images of their misery for their profit. He calls this project "Enjoy Poverty" (2008). Obviously, the project fails in its main goal, firstly because of the very definition of "profit" as a Western concept, which is not necessarily part of all cultures in the world; and secondly, and more importantly, Renzo's work is fundamentally dependent on the existence of poverty. In other words, if there were no misery in Congo, Renzo's work would not exist.

It is in this pornographic co-dependence that the dilemma of this essay is presented. The work of non-European immigrants who propose to answer the political questions of their contexts of origin depends fundamentally on the misery they are criticizing. We present to the European audience the possibility of masturbating with the poverty presented on stage, so that when they ejaculate they can finally feel the narcissistic pleasure of being on the "right side of history."

And this is where a market bubble is created: condemning immigrant artists to think in supposed solutions (or denunciations) of problems created by the continent in which we are presenting our works. And such a bubble gives us an illusory feeling that the work for a fairer world is being carried out.

A possible parallel to be drawn in this regard is the ecological idea of "recycling." The idea that every human being on Planet Earth is responsible for their garbage gives us the false feeling that we are doing something to stop the infamous climate change. But we know that our individual production impacts the environment in a very microscopic way compared to waste emissions by large corporations. Lately, I have seen the political work of non-Europeans (my own included) as "recycling": an irrelevant, neoliberal action that does not bring concrete changes in the problem that the action criticizes. It would be like saying that we're all here playing a very blind game, thinking we're agents of change.

If we could trace a totalizing and moralizing psychological profile, it would be like saying that the contemporary political artist/curator navigates between the poles of vanity and naivety. We are lost.

Third Shit: Contemporary Human Zoo

Dancing itself is far from being considered an innocent means of expression, and in the 1870s, doctors insisted on its relationship to hysteria. Dr. Henri Dagonet, for example, noted that 'among the numerous singularities of hysterical epidemics, there is a pronounced tendency to dance' (Dagonet 20). In 1865, when the number of cases of hysteria began to rise dramatically, a woman dancing at the Eldorado cafe-concert last compared by Edmond de Goncourt to the hysterical inmates at the Salpêtrière hospital because of her 'heated bestiality, [...] wild mane, [...] big mouth and the toothy laugh of a Bacchante' (Goncourt 62). Hysteria in the last third of the nineteenth century was a spectacular disease. The neurologist Jean-Martin Charcot divided the major hysterical attack into four stages. The first is epileptoid because its movements resemble the convulsive movements of epilepsy. Clown-ism (where the body contortions itself into all sorts of aerobic poses) is the second stage. In the third and fourth stages, the hysteric hallucinates and strikes theatrical poses.

Gordon (2009)

The importance and influence of art in the processes of maintaining Patriarchy and White Supremacy are already well known. I like to say that art, in our case Theatre, was kidnapped by the countless Poetics written in the last millennia, which legislate what is or what is not theatre. In this process of capture, numerous misrepresentations and domestications of bodies occurred. If we look at the turn of the 19th to the 20th century, such claims are scientifically proven, because the role of the "spectacle" in the birth of Western institutions of power is clear. To give a few examples: the popularization of Science through Darwinian scientific spectacles; the historical connections between hysteria and modern dance; and the aesthetic influence of human zoos on European avant-garde artists.

Recently, I have been mentoring a group of theatre students in Ghent, Belgium. We gave ourselves the task to carry out an in-depth study of the aesthetics and politics of the Extreme Right, focusing on the North American Alt-Right phenomenon and, with the help of researcher Carolina Nóbrega, to draw a direct historical line between all these ideologies from the 19th Century to contemporary times.

In our understanding, there is no overcoming in History. Colonialism, Nazism, slavery have never been overcome, they are open wounds that will never close. What we see today are updates to structures created in the past. We understand that the North American anti-Nazi political project after the Second World War was not a salvation, but a replacement of operating and oppressive powers through neoliberal ideologies produced in the Cold War (which should be called the Hot War, since in Latin America and the Middle East war was real and deadly).

The Human Zoos of the past centuries have never been surpassed and in this sense, I invite the reader to ask an absurd question that doesn't get out of my head: what are the possible entanglements (besides the moral context) we can find between the Human Zoos of the last century and the International Contemporary Theater Festivals in Europe?

O golpe é o mesmo, só muda a vítima.

Notes

¹ *The Furious Rodrigo Batista* was made in the first year of my Masters degree at DAS Theatre in the Academy of Theatre and Dance, Amsterdam.

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Biography

Rodrigo Batista is a Brazilian theatre maker and educator based in Amsterdam. In the context of the DAS Theatre Master Programme, he developed a collection of pieces aiming at bringing insurrection into the performance space. Previous to his work in Europe, he worked for over 10 years with his São Paulo-based group "[pH2]: estado de teatro". They presented theatrical investigations in dialogue with philosophy, cinema and dance, which received several grants and prizes. Rodrigo presented works in Brazil, Mexico, Colombia, Germany, Italy and the Netherlands. Moreover, he worked as a theatre educator in several cultural and social programmes in São Paulo. <https://www.portfoliorodrigobatista.com/>

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