

Sharing Matters

a conversation

between Eleonora Fabião and Jay Pather

Article DOI: <https://doi.org/10.70733/7eyert342gdn>

Eleonora Fabião, Jay Pather

Abstract

“Sharing Matters: a conversation between Eleonora Fabião and Jay Pather” is a co-written piece. After collaborating in a PARSE Conference presentation on embodiment and public art, the two artists-scholars, one from Rio de Janeiro and the other from Cape Town, continued dialoguing. The end result is the pages that follow. Pather and Fabião introduce some of their artistic and curatorial practices, share conceptual interests, reflect on historical background, discuss the intensity and impact of sociopolitical contexts in the creation process, and inspire one another to continue responding to abject violence tenaciously and collectively.

One of the beginnings happened in March 2021. Cecilia Lagerström and Jyoti Mistry sent an invitation (there is always an invitation, isn't there? Either someone sends it or we invite ourselves). I was at my studio in New York, quarantined with my family, when the message arrived. Cecilia wrote: “My vision is to invite and connect you and choreographer and curator Jay Pather from South Africa.” “The main theme of the conference is violence,” she said, and, for the “embodiment section” she was proposing “an open, warm and energizing conversation on how to open spaces in the city and in the society (where there perhaps seem to be none), on how we can speak from and with our bodies in these present times.”

I didn't know Jay and his work then, so I found the invitation particularly interesting: not to put the two of us at the same table for each of us to give a talk, but instead propose that two strangers meet in advance, develop a dialog and share it with others. Two artists born and raised in countries from the southern hemisphere who work in the university and on the streets, two artist-pedagogues-curators from Cape Town and Rio de Janeiro, cities known for their cultural vibrancy, social discrepancy, and colonial inheritance.

In the following month another email arrived. I was at my studio in New York, still quarantined with my family, when the message came. Cecilia wrote: “Jay proposed that the two of you could perhaps share some material from your practices before our meeting.” And so we did. We sent each other texts, images, and scheduled a first meeting. A first, and then a second, third, fourth. August, September, October, November. He was in Paris, I was in São Paulo. He was in Cape Town, I was in New York. He was in the Netherlands, I was in Rio. We were traveling for the first time after a year and a half of restrictions, and, somehow, we were giving support to one another.

We started following each other's lives and were becoming really curious about each other's practices. When the time came to send the abstract for our presentation, we decided to continue doing what we were already doing: sharing matters. Matters of all kinds: objective and subjective, tangible and intangible, personal and political. We wrote:

Eleonora Fabião is a Brazilian action artist who works with varied matters: human and other-than-human, visible and invisible, light and heavy, aesthetic and political. But, as she says, there is a raw matter: the circumstances. In a recent interview titled "the impossible as matter of thought and action" she said: "The thing is to listen to circumstances and to get into them to be moved by them, to move with them, and to move them in the directions that seem precise (necessary and certain) to me."^[1] Performance art and performance studies are her ways to estrange and subvert the logic of violence, to deal with historical mass and ghostly matter, to incite political imagination against coloniality, to practice difference without separability, and to articulate aesthetic, social, political, and spiritual matters in a country where necropolitics social inequality, racism, heteropatriarchy, and neoliberal fascism determine lives and deaths.

In introducing an early work with the Siwela Sonke Dance Theatre, Jay Pather wrote:

The body recalls more than through the head. Nerve and vessel, artery and synapse carry information from point to point, suffusing muscle, bone and cell with a plethora of image and sound, a flicker of light, a scream or a touch. Sometimes we wish that a delete button might annihilate some of this information. But the body instead stores relentlessly, file upon file, bottomless cabinets of memory. What does the body do with this ebb and flow, the seepage and spillage? What does a collective nation's memory do with these overflows of history?^[2]

In a country beset by intergenerational trauma as well as the continued abnegation of the majority of its people, Pather's curatorial and performance work often references the connection between nation-state and the deeply personal.

Fabião and Pather's practices are public-facing artistic discourse that involves performance, embodiment, audience interaction, site-responsiveness, and site-specificity. Research into areas of violence and its manifestations in a range of publics produces constantly shifting strategies on how to not so much represent as present actions that elicit responses of visibilizing, communal reaching, and creating room for conversation and dialog. These are attempts to also collapse the spaces between performer and the so-called spectator in a conjoined exploration of violence and its intensities. Fabião's work, in Brazil as well as abroad, and Pather's work, in South Africa and abroad, bring symmetries and asymmetries to this difficult, complex territory. Their conversations span their processes of working, their moments of achievement and failure, commonalities and contradictions.

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In the fertile and feverish conversations with Eleonora, we shared persistent, searching questions around violence and its representation in relation to our geographical contexts but also within our personal lives and our homes. We specifically explored the embodiment of our respective contemporary contexts of abject violence as well as residues of violent histories what one might term the persistence of intergenerational trauma and how we and our communities navigate this. Our conversations around growing up in similar societies in the Global South were complemented by another intersection our work and our travels, and our contested and complicated relationship with the Global North. The richness in the exchange carried a melancholic tone, an

underlying sense of a pulse of violence that informs our work wittingly and unwittingly. There was a great deal of material and we decided on each of us choosing aspects of the other's work for discussion.

Eleonora asked for my thoughts on the production *Qaphela Caesar* (2010) (Beware Caesar in isiZulu), a mixed-media installation and performative work based on William Shakespeare's *Julius Caesar* that explored issues of colonial and contemporary brutalities, betrayals, and deceptions, and the abiding matrix of postcolonial political violence that envelops and occasionally engulfs us.^[3] I have written on this previously, so here I shall do not much more than share thoughts on my approach to this work and how this developed over time in relationship to violence, its representation, and embodiment.^[4]



Body of Evidence (2010) with Siyanda Duma, Ntombikayise Gasa and Neliswa Rushualang. Photographer: Val Adamson. Courtesy of Siwela Sonke Dance Theatre

The steady decline into an embodiment of Insanity and Absurdity

In the late 1970s, the revolution, or the *struggle* as we knew of it in South Africa, was beyond all else an attempt at making sense of catastrophe, developing a *sensible* response that considered nonviolent narratives of organizing, protest, disobedience to meet the force of the violence of apartheid. The 1976 student protest that began in Soweto was a watershed moment, when young bodies, hurt severely by the apartheid police, stealthily expelled themselves from close-knit, nurturing communities of family and friends and transformed themselves into exiled warriors fighting apartheid. Back home, organizations such as the United Democratic Front, led by, among others, the late Desmond Tutu, hosted peaceful protests large masses of obedient bodies occupying varying levels of non-violent disobedience. I created work that evoked the romantic revolution for these rallies. The works relied largely on a narrative unfolding of the tensions and counter-tensions of apartheid and its plaintive and stoic endurance. This endurance was not quite embodiment but the representation of the masses rising *above* the body producing an out-of-body experience of overcoming the trauma of the moment. There was an imaging of torturous yet ultimately triumphant revolution and freedom in swaths of bodies moving together, synchronous and harmonizing, an out-of-body hovering over the realities of pain, to articulate more specifically a dreaming even with very few indicators of respite in the actual and real world. In meeting the pervasive imposition of rational apartheid, an overwhelming singular “we shall overcome” narrative ensued, an almost romantic utopian ideal. It was patently clear that as ungraspable as the revolution might have seemed, art

needed to give our society not the realities of embodied pain but an imagined strength for the development of morale.

In the late 1980s, this out-of-body representation of my work began to bother me. Instead, I began to work with the body grounded in kinetic, material formulations of space, time, and design while using mixed media such as projections to bathe the body in the realities of apartheid violence. So, the body itself was not “representing” but “being,” and yet being in an almost unemotive way. I created choreography that was often performed against a backdrop of 16 mm films that I cheekily borrowed from the South African Apartheid Propaganda office Paratus. The experience of state violence arose out of a juxtaposition and not a straightforward condemnation of the apartheid government, nor asking of dancers to take on pseudo-revolutionary guises. So, these strategies were maintained and aimed at disrupting these single-channel experiences of violence, allowing for dialog and discursive subjective experiences. One was invited to move in and out of a montage. Fragmentation lived alongside moments of coherence in a reach toward these multiple porous realities. Importantly, this mixed-media approach to choreography back then allowed for performers to inhabit the work at a remove, representing abject violence as one part of a whole and not enacting, absorbing, reproducing, or even re-presenting acts of violence and carrying in their own bodies the weight of trauma.

However, after 1994, with the declaration of independence and an end to apartheid, there were brief moments in the psyche of our country when maximum embodiment surfaced. The Truth and Reconciliation Commission of 1996 invited confessions by the perpetrators of traumatic acts of violence that produced unmitigated, public outpourings of grief from families of people who were tortured and murdered. These moments were often followed by hugging and reconciliatory embraces. This uneasy combination of cathartic forgiveness and a conspicuous lack of reparation and material restoration imploded our psyche and saw this odd attempt at bringing the floating body uneasily back to itself in other spaces as well.

During this period, artists were encouraged by cultural leaders to “stop and look at the flowers,” a reference to a post-liberation poem. This meant a pausing in our out-of-body evocation of a romantic revolution, pulling back from avoiding the material body and staying longer in the phenomenal body, now offered the luxury of simple acknowledged perception. Various techniques that moved beyond techniques of protest dances and classical African dances evolved. In my own work, mediation, ritual in performance, the Alexander technique all entered the rehearsal space to stop and look at the proverbial flowers within. Of course, these flowers didn’t quite all exist in the manner we intended. Severe economic inequity and the conspicuous absence of land and wealth redistribution meant that the introspection had little reward. With the gesture of looking inward, however, what surfaced were deeply troubled psyches and bodies.

Barely ten years after independence, cracks began to grow into wedges, and South Africa hit a time of great political upheaval. Bribery and betrayals were slowly revealed, assaulting the promised stability ushered in by Nelson Mandela. President Thabo Mbeki, who succeeded Mandela, ousted Deputy President Jacob Zuma within four years, who was subsequently voted in as President by the African National Congress four years later, and in turn ousted Mbeki. From the onset of democracy, there were of course the negotiations with European and American economies and an implementation of what it takes for a country like South Africa with a black government to survive within the globalized, neoliberal economy. These political machinations wreaked havoc on the psyche still hankering after the dream of the fruits of liberation.

To mark South Africa’s ten years of democracy, I created *The Beautiful Ones Must Be Born* (2005) in various spaces at Constitution Hill, a former prison used to incarcerate political prisoners during apartheid Nelson

Mandela and Communist Party Leader Joe Slovo were among them that had been transformed into a monument housing the Constitutional Court.^[5] In many respects the site of previous struggle and the proximity of the Constitutional Court afforded a space for a last-ditch attempt at making sense more a howl of despair of a growing insanity of unresolved violence in our society.

Straight after, I made *Body of Evidence* (2007), with nine dancers ranging in age from 22 to 70.^[6] The work had started off as an idea to create choreography inside large-scale projections of parts of the human anatomy derived from Gray's Anatomy drawings, and because of a workshop process with the performers ended up as something much more than simple containment.



Caesar Interrupted (2012) with Mxolisi Nkomonde, Sandile Mkhize and Sibusiso Gantsa. Photographer: Val Adamson. Courtesy of Siwela Sonke Dance Theatre

In *Performance and the Afterlives of Injustice*, Catherine Cole wrote:

The afterlives of apartheid as portrayed in Body of Evidence are as cellular and enduring as they are overwhelming and loud a cacophony and surfeit of confusing, inscrutable dreamlike apparitions that resonate as deeply familiar but also defiantly strange. When our protagonist arises in solitude at the show's end, his body appears very much intact and healthy, even virile. We are forced to reconcile his hale external visage with the sprawl of inscrutable phantasms that have populated the stage during the previous hour and twenty minutes. This confusion is what lies within him. Yet if this last image was our first impression of this man, who would suspect that such turbulence lies within?^[7]

Made three years later, *Qaphela Caesar* (2010) represented a complete shattering of this notion of making sense within the body and its kinetic gestures.^[8] Set in spaces such as the old colonial Cape Town City Hall, and later at the Johannesburg Stock Exchange, the work plunged into the insanity of the body's attempt at making sense of a political system that had become incomprehensible, if not ineffectual and broken. The work co-opted the story of Shakespeare's tragedy of corruption and betrayal, referencing its own questionable emergence, and served as a sounding board for the layering of precarity from within and outside the country. The political violent machination spoke to a work that was essentially a haunting.

In meeting violence of its environment, the out of body, the avoiding body, the stopping-to-look-at-the-flowers body, and the inward-looking body gave way to an insanity an inability to cohere. Insanity, the non-sequitur, unfinished smudged utterances, grand and vacuous political proclamations large groups of modernist choreography of men in suits and formal shoes and women in ball gowns, gave way to politicians with their pants around their ankles, toasting their leader *ad infinitum*, laughing their way to large-scale betrayal and civil war. The only centering of the body came with Caesar's consort Calpurnia. Neliswa Rushualang, who played Calpurnia, used her own *sangoma* (diviner) tradition to inform a performative vocabulary that held the dark, fatal, and unstoppable prophesy.

This single moment of embodied delivery was surrounded by showy tango dances, half gestures, and ballet dancers on pointe shoes slipping through the dusty cupboards of the archaic City Hall. In one final scene, a white singer in bad drag lip synched Barbara Streisand's *The Way We Were* in front of a backdrop of struggle footage, depicting marches led by Tutu and other heroes of the liberation movement. This use of impersonation and appropriation was disarmingly poignant as if only absurd images of representation could touch the depth of hopelessness and emotion. In the final scenes, after the fall of Brutus and the African National Congress, a politician tried to force-feed traditional Zulu artifacts to individual members of the audience, while the leader of the winning party, the predominantly white Democratic Alliance, also in drag, led an all-white Afrikaans rock band outside the City Hall singing *Ek is lief ek is lief ek is lief vir Suid Afrika* (I am in love with South Africa).

In this instance, then, Cape Town City Hall was not a space offering meaning, resolve, or respite. It merely stood as a caricature of itself. It is a large Edwardian building and boasts the balcony on which Nelson Mandela stood and spoke for the first time after his release in 1990. His speech started with the words "Comrades and Fellow South Africans, I greet you all in the name of peace, democracy, and freedom, I stand here before you not as a prophet, but as a humble servant."^[9] The structure of the City Hall and its layered history, colonial and postcolonial, and its fourteen rooms of varying dimensions across two floors provided the ironic and wobbly container for unwieldy bodies that were at sea, untethered to anything of substance, least of all a cranky City Hall.

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In our presentation in November 2021, I did not address what I will share now. I do it here only because of the conversations we had back then. Hope that's OK. During the months we were planning our session, I was reading texts by Édouard Glissant and Denise Ferreira da Silva, and studying Indigenous cosmogonies, especially focusing on Ailton Krenak's and Davi Kopenawa's perspectives. Those voices were, somehow, present during our conversations and energizing the artistic actions I was performing. Here, I will bring in some of Glissant's and Ferreira da Silva's thoughts in order to reflect on the artist's work and the role of poetical and political imagination in our historical moment.

In *Introduction to a Poetics of Diversity* (1996), Glissant calls for the re-imagining of the world and draws attention to the role of the artist in this process, "[b]ecause the artist is someone who approaches the world's imagination."^[10] The Martinican poet philosopher argues that:

[T]he ideologies of the world, the visions of the world, predictions, the ambitious plans are beginning to fail, and this new imagination must begin to rise up. This is no longer to dream of the world, it is to enter it.^[11]

In another lecture from the same book, he suggests that poetry is key to access and relates to the

unpredictability of the world because “the poet is not afraid of unpredictability.”^[12] As I understand it, poetry considered here as a poetic force that can manifest itself in any artistic genre, with performance art my main focus not only proposes or rehearses reconfigurations of the world, but actually operates them. The poetic operation is a unique way of politically “entering the world” and engaging with its complexity, being the “unpredictability of the world” performance art’s raw matter its pulse, blood, sap.

Glissant’s sensibility to unpredictability is related to his understanding of opacity. As is well known, he claims “the right to opacity for everyone.”^[13] His “poetics of relation” acknowledges the unknown as a constitutive aspect of relation rather than an impediment to it. Moreover, opacity is perceived as a condition of possibility for relation. This view is particularly meaningful in our individualized neoliberal cultures, in which the experience of identity is frequently and poorly associated with transparency, fixedness, and efficiency. Glissant also calls attention to the critical differences between the oppressed and the oppressors’ identity conceptions and experiences:

The oppressed, who are denied their identity [...] have a conception of relational identity; a capacity to move beyond identity. The oppressors, however, don’t, because they are committed to a fixed identity identity as a single root. The thinking of tremblement is this: even when I am fighting for my identity, I consider my identity not as the only possible identity in the world.^[14]

The “thinking of tremblement” is another key formulation to our discussion on embodiment, performance art and violence. The “poetics of trembling” is a refusal of fixed and totalitarian ideas with great corporeal resonance.

What I call tremblement is neither incertitude nor fear. It is not what paralyzes us. Trembling thinking is the instinctual feeling that we must refuse all categories of fixed and imperial thought. Tremblement is thinking in which we can lose time, lose time searching, in which we can wander and in which we can counter all the systems of terror, domination, and imperialism the poetics of trembling allows us to be in real contact with the world and with the peoples of the world.^[15]

This trembling that, as said, is not a consequence of fear or incertitude, but rather the effect of being opened up to instincts and intuitions that refuse “thoughts of domination,” is a micro-dance, a shaky micro-dance in consonance with the indeterminacy of the world. A trembling world with which, and through which, we can imagine and enact our poetic actions; through which and with which we can be imagined and enacted by our poetic actions. Precisely because of the trembling thinking with and through it, we can “enter the world” and reimagine it.

Ferreira da Silva is also interested in the power of imagination, particularly invested in reimagining modes of sociability. In a beautifully titled article, “Difference without separability” (2016), the Brazilian philosopher-artist argues that “the methodological and ontological grounds of the modern subject [are] linear temporality and spatial separation.”^[16] Her proposal is to “re-think sociality”^[17] to imagine forms of sociability based on an understanding of difference that is not grounded in notions of “separability, determinacy, and sequentiality,” the three ontological pillars sustaining modern thought.^[18] That is, Ferreira da Silva calls for an understanding of sociability and difference that opens up when we stop reproducing separatist, deterministic, and sequential mechanics. The fact is that we have inherited a vision of matter built on solidity, of time based on progressive sequentiality, of space marked by segmentation, of meaning closed in definition, of event grounded in causality, of relation focused on transparency, of identity fixated with steadiness. Following the same logic, the “racial grammar” is predominantly harsh and separatist we live daily in a fundamental separation based on ethnicity, nationality, and social identity.^[19] On the other hand, Ferreira da Silva suggests that

[a] figuring of The World nourished by the imagination would inspire us to rethink sociality without the abstract fixities produced by the Understanding and the partial and total violence they authorize against humanity's cultural (non-white/non-European) and physical (more-than-human) "Others."^[20]

She asks:

What is at stake? What will have to be relinquished for us to unleash the imagination's radical creative capacity and draw from it what is needed for the task of thinking The World otherwise? Nothing short of a radical shift in how we approach matter and form.^[21]

Nothing less than "a radical shift in how we approach matter and form." Giving this premise, I ask: Isn't difference without separability itself the co-constitutive and intra-active co-implication of differences the matter-form to which she refers? Aren't the performing arts fundamental modes of doing in this urgent imaginative search? What scenes could guide us toward practices of difference without separability? And, in reverse, what modes of sociability could generate such scenes? As I see them, forms are energy conductors. And, depending on them, certain arrangements of relations among human and other-than-human bodies and forces become possible. Relations can be made depending on these arrangements. And relations can be unmade according to these arrangements. The poetic operation is a way of re-imagining and re-shaping modes of sociability and ecopolitical sensibility.

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Eleonora's offering of readings of Glissant and Ferreira da Silva is inspired and provocative. Without attempting to make a blithe, easy connection, the meditations on opacity, trembling, and Ferreira da Silva's provocation "a radical shift in how we approach matter and form" informs my own artistic navigations of the enforced separation and embedded markings of race and space in the country of my birth.

I grew up aware that if I had to stay alive, moving in a violent apartheid society I had to come up with psychic as well as practical solutions to material restrictions on the body. The Group Areas Act (1950) kept my movements across the land in constant check, forcing me to acquire permits to travel across a province because of my ethnicity; the Immorality Act (1927) bottled down and kept my sexuality under unwavering surveillance; the Separate Amenities Act (1953) blocked my access to libraries; and the University Education Act (1959) restricted my need for education to universities specially designated for those of my racial category. I won't go into detail on what such restrictions in one's formative years do to the body, its lifelong hesitations and vacillations from an inherited terror of fully occupying space to instances of stumbling over-confidence, as one oscillates like a pendulum on this spectrum of what is *allowed* based on one's race. So, in how one inhabits the body, a body marked and trailed, regimented, and held, one improvises, aiming wildly at times at a coherence between outside restrictions and inward desire.

Creating artistic work during apartheid was an extension of this improvised living, largely around how to avoid being banned, or the work being shut down, which it was on several occasions; how to avoid, step aside, navigate, negotiate, remake, and re-emerge in a quest to avoid being obliterated.

surface tension an impulse poem for an embodied vocabulary

Move, block

Avoid then, wait, turn. Move, block...

Pause, turn around. Move, block

Wait. Annihilate plan, replan. Move, block

Stay, retreat, settle temporarily circumnavigate, pass, move, block

Hold, reduce, obliterate, become small, adapt, sense the hurting dysfunction, smile, Stop. Smile again, show teeth, lift hand, lift other hand fast, wave, move block

Drop hands, step to the side, wait, step back, once, twice, thrice, move forward block

Look down look up, hand in pocket hand out quick turn block

Look away push step back step side push block

Recoil. Run, drop, cover face, spit, block

Wait. Smile, laugh, block

Laugh again LOUD , block

Quiet

Quiet

Wait. Look at the sky

Sing in monotone mothertongue

Straighten back, avoid, tire, rest, wait

Think. Think to destroy, evaporate, disappear,

Empty eyes, then float, float, hover and watch

Gently fall, reappear, block

Breathe, only chest move, block

Retreat, tremble, softly

Wait

Years later, words such as mercurial, paradox, ambiguity, twists, porous, shift, trans- saturate my vocabulary indeed, a 1995 work was entitled *shifting spaces, tilting time*. Eleonora asked me to talk through my article “Negotiating the Postcolonial Black Body as a Site of Paradox,” expressing interest in “paradox” and I noted that a paradox can be both vexing and generative.^[22]

The article was originally a lecture in an event around curation held at the Haus der Kunst titled “Show me the world.”^[23] I changed the topic in my own paper to “Show me the ~~world~~ gaze,” highlighting a crucial European subjectivity that I wished to foreground. I addressed the paradox of the curation of black artists, a paradox arising out of this subjective gaze and the associated anxieties, while at the same time acknowledging the need for greater visibility of black artists and academics in festivals and at conferences. This was also exacerbated by attempting to keep blackness invisible, or one’s attempts at visibilizing blackness invisible. And it’s something that has pervaded Europe in all my visits here, this uneasiness around visibility and invisibility of issues of blackness, and the stepping on eggshells to avoid the violence, or perhaps not confront the very present, lurking violence of racial categorization. How do we embody this as another layer of triggering tremors as we step in and out of awkward conversation?

Embodying racial categorization overtly and covertly bestowed from the outside, is a kind of dance, a dance of paradox, fleeting, kinetic, unsettled, opaque yes, and trembling (thanks Eleonora). In the article I referenced Anthony Bogues and Frantz Fanon:

Invoking Foucault’s notions of the archaeology of knowledge, material traces left behind, and memory that grapples with this, Bogues asks us to turn our attention away from the object of our gaze to the archaeology of the gaze, to excavate what it is that frightens us, or what is it that we remember. Accepting that violence can create somatic trauma where memory is nothing more than “fleeting images, the percussion of blows, sounds and movements of the body disconnected, cacophonous” demand to adopt a contrived civility in proper society, while harbouring such a traumatized, disparate sense of self, is to wear what Fanon perceived as the divided self: “The black man has two dimensions. One with his fellows, the other with the white man. A Negro behaves differently with another Negro.”^[24]

I addressed this also through an understanding that the curation of live art, of presence, is an unfathomable paradox.

The immediacy and spontaneity of performance is inherently resistant to premeditated arrangement, such that its curation demands, so when one factors race in the human body, sometimes performing in foreign context into this precarious mix the spectre of hermetically sealed racially inscribed fairs that paraded black bodies as curiosities may be hard to erase and opens fresh questions around visibilizing and invisibilizing in the contemporary racially unresolved, troubled world.^[25]

Through curation, I was also impatient with the kind of persistent silencing that surrounded blackness as a no-go (or softly go) area for discourse. Ntando Cele’s work *Complicated Art for Dummies*, which I curated at the ICA Live Festival in 2014, in which Cele appropriated a white alter ego, Bianca White, to explore issues of power and prejudice provided a heartbreaking depiction of this complex labor of shifting through invisibility and visibility.^[26] In her performance there were moments when the character White loses control and Cele attempts to reassert herself, refusing to be obliterated. Absurdity and impotence alternated with a depiction of the grotesque as Cele

used her facial features to play, painfully, with ideas of mask, burlesque, and visibility.

In another work, the artist collective iQhiya, comprising twelve black femme identifying artists who created performances around the exclusion of black women artists in galleries, refused to perform at the festival inviting the audience to a conversation instead of watching them. During the event, Buhlebezwe Siwani asked “Why must a black body always perform, why can’t we just be?”^[27]

Taking this notion of a dominant racially inscribed cultural narrative that has been maintained and embedded as necessary to coloniality and modernity, it becomes clear that these movements of black people in and out of power structures and the performance of race and identity started over 450 years ago. In the face of centuries of abnegation and an institutionalized systemic violence on black bodies, this spatializing, creating, and regenerating ways of operating is inimical to the survival of bodies, moving in ways that defy static identities: only the creations of inexplicable, myriad pathways of survival alternating with quiet, imperceptible regeneration. And therefore paradox is norm.

In projects that I have curated, these ideas of an embodied rewriting of pathways and disrupting topographies recur in a way to invent circuits and flows of survival. “Infecting the City,” a public art festival that I curate in Cape Town, is a case in point. Embracing the idea of the apartheid city as a vast and faulty theater to experience and reckon with histories of separation and inequity, artists embody the topography of Cape Town as a palimpsest, carrying indelible inscriptions of several bitter battles. Aerial images of this topography, with expansive white-owned property alongside black townships, separated by clusters of trees or a highway, speak to entrenched containers of trauma violence not as an abstraction, violence that does not come from outside or above that you may confront or deflect, but arising out of the land and its fences, seeping deep into one’s psyche in a country that promised its people freedom thirty years ago.

Public art can barely touch these vast inscriptions of violent topography. But the artists in the festival try. From works that consider the invisibilized graves of slaves to works that disrupt the ineffectual monument, from works performed outside Parliament and the Supreme Court to works of reconciliation inside churches that still stand as bastions of separateness, from traveling works that link a township with the center of the city to works that speak of dreaming, and works that turn the city into a sensorium and a space where, repeatedly, artists consider individual embodiment through collective touch.

In recent projects that my Institute has produced, and despite the evocation of poetic futures in such titles as *Love as Action*, *Love as Ethic*, *Public Intimacies*, *Performative Utopias* (after curators Dominique Malaquais and Julie Peghini), and *Sentient Being*, so many contemporary works by African artists from Nigeria (Jelili Atiku) to Kenya (Syowia Kyambi), from Zimbabwe (nora chipaumire) to South Africa (Albert Khoza) implied another title.

In the last ICA Live Art Festival, a title that encapsulated an enduring acknowledgement of coloniality and its continued reverberations emerged: *the earth still shakes*.

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From the performances Jay asked me to talk about during our presentation, I choose to share here *nós aqui, entre o céu e a terra* (we here, between sky and earth, 2021). This work was commissioned by the 34th São Paulo Biennial titled “Faz escuro mas eu canto” (Though is dark, still I sing). One reason for this choice is very pragmatic: I am still trembling with it. The other is affective: I associate Jay with this work since we were meeting

and dialoging during the period in which the action was performed. In order to introduce it, I will present the letter-project that I wrote at the beginning of the process and two images. Important to emphasize is that the work was performed in the city of São Paulo, the biggest city of the country, where I was born and grew up: Brazil. A country where circa 19 million people are currently living in a situation of food insecurity; where every 21 minutes a young black person dies, murdered; where indigenous populations rights and lives have been violated for 521 years; where a recent Minister of Environment used to be an advisor for over 20 years of an organization that represents the agricultural and livestock sector; where neoliberal necropolitical capitalism is ferociously operating to dismantle public institutions. A country that for the past four years was governed by a president who openly praised the military dictatorship and endorsed torture.



Aerial view of the São Paulo Biennial Pavilion. Drawing by Eleonora Fabião on a photo by Danilo Tamashiro, courtesy of the artist

we here, between sky and earth

March 13, 2021.

Today marks one year since quarantine began in Brazil. It is still dark, 4:43 in the morning.

I am writing this letter to tell you about the project, we here, between sky and earth, an action to be performed between September and December 2021 as part of the 34th São Paulo Biennial. What will actually happen will depend on the circumstances. Or rather, it will happen through them, because circumstances are a fundamental material.

It is still dark, but the sun will soon rise.

The action begins with a flight of 27 chairs the same number of states in Brazil + the Federal District = 26 + 1. All chairs will be borrowed from public institutions linked to healthcare, education, culture, and legislation located in a 5km radius around the Ibirapuera Park, the place where the biennial pavilion is located. Each chair will move through the streets raised on 4 long bamboo rods (3m each) tied to its legs. Chairs from schools, museums, hospitals, legislative assemblies, theaters, libraries, psychiatric clinics, universities, will arrive one at a time, from above, at the Ciccillo Matarazzo Pavilion. We will be 8 people carrying out the successive walks +

1 photographer. Sometimes a mirror will go together. And, rest assured, we will take all necessary precautions in relation to the pandemic because we are only interested in making life in life.

we here, between sky and earth continues with the aligning and setting of the materials involved. The 27 chairs will be positioned in the exhibition space and visitors may sit on them if they wish. The chairs are not "objets trouvés" (found objects), nor were they created for the occasion they are our invited objects. A very specific type of thing, a public thing (res publica) they are not commodities, nor private property, but common goods. As for the bamboo rods, we will work with 9 in total. After the walks, we will place 1 inside + 8 outside the pavilion. The 8 outside will be partially buried into the ground of the Ibirapuera Park (2.20m into the earth and 80cm out), and the bamboo rod inside will be suspended from the ceiling. Considering the rectangular shape and scale of the pavilion as a reference, the 9 chosen spots to place the bamboo rods mark the 3 vertices of a triangle, the 4 vertices of a square, and 2 diametrically opposite points of a circle, all drawn in superposition over the building. The rod inside the exhibition space simultaneously marks 1 vertex of the square + the center of the circle. It is positioned near the chairs and suspended 20cm off the floor by a steel cable. And, on the floor, below this pendulous aerial line, will be the mirror. The shape of this mirror is born out of the intersection of the 3 forms: it has 1 curved side, another diagonal, and 2 right-angles. And, besides bamboo and mirror, there is another major element: steel. The ends of all bamboo rods will be wrapped with steel cables in compact and shiny spirals, and the metal will be also applied in all chairs. We will fix steel identification tags to them indicating the name of the institution they came from + the title of the project + the edition of the biennale.

The dawn is almost beginning to begin.

Besides the chairs and the suspended bamboo rod in the exhibition space, there will be photos of the street action, images of the movement in the streets. In addition, there will be one aerial image of the Ibirapuera Park, with the triangle, circle, and square drawn out in silver. There will also be images of the rods being stuck into the park's ground. This way, visitors will know more about how the chairs arrived, where they came from, where the bamboo rods are located, and how they were buried. This way, visitors will see the geometric lines, sense the diagram, perceive the force-field they are part of.

It is starting to lighten up the day will be blue, but I see everything in bright silver.

An important moment will be a conversation that will take place at the exhibition space with the participation of the chairs, public servants from the 27 collaborating institutions, invited artists, and biennial visitors. During this meeting we will ask ourselves: How to articulate diverse knowledges? How to create consistent interinstitutional actions and work collaboratively more and better? We will imagine possibilities together for each other. It seems to me that if we do not start acting in this direction, we will continue confined even after the quarantine. As I see it, now is really the time for artists to contribute more directly to the creation and implementation of public policies. This encounter is an inquiry in that direction.

The day has dawned. Morning has just begun. There is light, more and more light.

Once the biennial is over, we here, between sky and earth finishes but does not end. All the materials, aligned and transformed through art, will continue on toward different destinations. The borrowed chairs will be taken to new institutional homes. They will all be swapped: the chair that came from a hospital will now belong to the city hall; the chair that once belonged to the city hall will now belong to a high school; the theater chair will go

to a blood center, and so on. At delivery, each institution will be gifted with a framed and signed photo of the project specifically, the photo of the chair that they are receiving while suspended in the streets. However, what will be done with the new acquisitions is not for us to say chairs, people, images, artwork, narratives will continue moving one another. We hope that beauty and many alliances will be born from these moves.

As for the other materials, the bamboo rods will be taken out of the ground, dried in the sun, and burned. The ashes will be spread in the park. The steel cables will be melted down and transformed into a compact sphere that will be wrapped in paina wool and kept in a wooden box. So, white wool and silver sphere will live in the darkness of the box. The mirror will be buried in the park. Perhaps one day it will be found. If it is, I hope that it will be possible to see in it all that it saw.

Good morning, a big hug and on we go we here, between sky and earth.

Eleonora Fabião.

Public institutions that collaborated in the action: Assembleia Legislativa do Estado de São Paulo; Biblioteca Anne Frank; Biblioteca Mário de Andrade; Câmara Municipal de São Paulo; Centro Cultural da Diversidade; Centro Cultural São Paulo; Centro Cultural Vila Itooró; Centro de Atenção Integrada em Saúde Mental (UNIFESP); Centro de Atenção Psicossocial CAPS Itapeva; Centro de Convivência e Cooperativa Ibirapuera; Escola Estadual Profa. Marina Cintra; Escola Municipal de Educação Infantil Armando de Arruda Pereira; Escola Municipal de Educação Infantil Patrícia Galvão; Fundação Theatro Municipal de São Paulo; Hemocentro UNIFESP; Hospital do Servidor Público Estadual de São Paulo; Hospital Municipal Infantil Menino Jesus; Instituto Biológico de São Paulo; Museu Afro Brasil; Museu da Diversidade Sexual; Museu do Tribunal de Justiça do Estado de São Paulo; Museu Lasar Segall; SP Escola de Teatro; Teatro João Caetano; Teatro Sérgio Cardoso; Universidade Estadual Paulista.

This action directly involved more than a hundred people. This work would have been impossible were it not for the engagement and solidarity of each of those who made themselves available and willing to make it happen. For their collaboration, we thank them deeply. We thank the desire to open up and to future. In the historical moment that fell upon us to live, to gather in order to imagine vital modes of making things happen has tremendous meaning and force. We here, between sky and earth.



Eleonora Fabião and collaborators, *we here, between sky and earth* (2021). Chair from the Museum of Sexual Diversity arriving at the Ibirapuera Park. Photo: Jaime Acioli, courtesy of the artist

Footnotes

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