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Poetics of the Body in Artistic Creation in Marina Abramović and Elke Hering

Carla Carvalho¹Leomar Peruzzo¹Pedro Gottardi¹¹Universidade Regional de Blumenau – FURB, Blumenau/SC, Brazil

ABSTRACT – Poetics of the Body in Artistic Creation in Marina Abramović and Elke Hering – This study contemplates the body as a reflective place to observe artistic creations, having two artists as inspiring perspective: Marina Abramović and Elke Hering. The general goal was to investigate the dialogues established by the artists' works and the body as aesthetic potency. The analytical observation of Abramović's performance and Hering's work allowed a dive into the space of the body as a field of sensitive potentialities and possible relations with knowledge in art. In the end, congruences, similarities, the distances of the bodies created in art as thematic and support make discussions in the field of aesthetic experience in art possible.

Keywords: **Body in Art. Sculpture and Performance. Elke Hering. Marina Abramović.**

RÉSUMÉ – La Poétique du Corps en Création Artistique dans Marina Abramović et Elke Hering – L'étude part du corps comme lieu de réflexion pour observer les créations artistiques, en ayant comme perspective inspirateur deux artistes: Marina Abramović et Elke Hering. L'objectif général était d'étudier les dialogues établis par les œuvres des artistes et le corps comme puissance esthétique. L'observation analytique de la *performance* d'Abramović et l'œuvre d'Hering a permis de plonger dans l'espace du corps comme un champ de potentialités sensibles et des relations possibles avec les connaissances dans l'art. A la fin, les congruences, les similitudes, les distances du corps dans l'art en tant que thème et support sont mises en évidence, permettant de discuter le corps comme un domaine d'expérience esthétique dans l'art.

Mots-clés: **Corps dans l'Art. Sculpture et Performance. Elke Hering. Marina Abramović.**

RESUMO – Poéticas do Corpo na Criação Artística em Marina Abramović e Elke Hering – O estudo parte do corpo como local reflexivo para observar criações artísticas, tendo como perspectiva inspiradora duas artistas: Marina Abramović e Elke Hering. O objetivo geral foi investigar os diálogos estabelecidos pelas obras dessas artistas e o corpo como potência estética. A observação analítica da *performance* de Abramović e a obra de Hering permitiram um mergulho no espaço do corpo como campo de potencialidades sensíveis e possíveis relações com saberes em arte. Ao final, congruências, semelhanças, distanciamentos do corpo em arte como temática e suporte possibilitam discussões no campo da experiência estética em arte.

Palavras-chave: **Corpo na Arte. Escultura e Performance. Elke Hering. Marina Abramović.**

The Body that Moves us

The body, sometimes a symbolic field, sometimes inspiring of forms or support for art, raises numerous possibilities for research. The idea of adopting the body as a starting point for reflections around its use in the creative proposals of two artistic icons (Marina Abramović and Elke Hering) represents a field to be understood and exploited. This choice proposes the constant imbrication of macro-cultural and micro-cultural contexts, of artistic creation and fruition. Abramović, as a world-known artist (macro dimension), and Hering, as a local artist (micro dimension), instigate this daring proposal to make approximations in the field of contemporary art.

With this motivation, we dare to explore some possibilities of the body in art, adopting it as the starting point of the artistic production of the previously mentioned visual artists and their reverberations in contemporary art. Abramović's world-wide work (1960s to present), due to her performance proposals that challenge the limits of human reason, suggesting discussions and even existential inquiries. Hering's work, more local and national in scope, between the 1960s, 1970s and 1980s, especially about the language of sculpture and the possibilities of three-dimensionality in art.

When speaking of the body and other cultural contexts of human history, the meanings, uses and appropriations as the theme and support of art were diverse, as much as human diversity is. Perhaps the first relationship we establish culturally is through the body, with visuality as the main way of accessing the images of the world around us. The imaging and iconographic mechanisms of contemporaneity '[...] are works of art, of publicity, of visual communication – in which we move daily between them' (Pires, 2005, p. 22), sometimes fixed, sometimes volatile, receive new dynamics with the introduction of the body as support. This aspect dynamizes the perception of the subject as a spectator, which begins to interact in different levels of intensity and spatiality.

In order to guide our discussions, we seek, in our restlessness around the body in contemporary art, motivations derived from studies developed in the Research Group on Art and Aesthetics in Education of the Graduate



Program in Education of the *Universidade Regional de Blumenau* (FURB). One of the central questions is: how do the artists in question poetically use the body as a starting point for their creative processes? The quest for answers to our questions originated from the reflective paths, analysis of the presences and absences of the body in the works of Marina Abramović and Elke Hering, with the intention of bringing to the surface indicative poetics, connections and imbrications generating potencies of the body in creation, as well as reflective possibilities. The reflection on the use of the body in art, in the perspective of distinct works from the artists, was the basis for relating the performative potentialities of the body in the proposition of current art study processes.

The body as a place of sensations, which inspires artistic proposals in contemporary times, incites keen eyes to perceive what only the body can offer and feel. To Barbosa (2010), the place of the body as an object of inspiration for art allows '[...] multiple approaches such as the transformations characterized by the modern individual, in the constructions of gender and race and in the rhetoric of sex and the imaginary' (Barbosa, 2010, p. 1201). These cultural factors define behaviors in relation to the body and its configurations in a set of subjective evidences that legitimize the performative values related to form and beauty.

Contemporaneity establishes specific configurations regarding the mechanisms of control and power, configuring different ways and forms of being in the world. The body, manipulated by authoritarianism, doomed to the conditioning of the dictatorship of consumerism, brutalizes its perception and aborts the existential potentialities. '[...] a body of useful training and not of rational mechanics, but one in which, by virtue of that very fact, a number of natural requirements and functional constraints are beginning to emerge' (Foucault, 2005, p. 155).

Considering the body as a cultural, economic value, natural heritage, loaded with sensitive meanings, consisting of a natural, biological place, culturally produced, focus of representation and social senses. 'The actions and representations of the body are the result of the complex relationship between nature and culture that is covered with desires and embodied in Art' (Barbosa, 2010, p. 1201). Culture establishes the norms through which bodies take on dimensions and maintains a two-way relationship according

to social contexts. A place in which science finds a field for constant and incisive investigations, art, especially the visual arts, appropriates the body as object and theme, assuming different meanings (Pires, 2005).

The contemporary aspects that affect bodies and their relations with art are closely linked to a way of considering the presence of the body which is sometimes conditioned by the discontinuous ways of experiencing time. The natural ephemerality of the body and the vulnerability to the disposable act to a point that these bodies do not perceive themselves immersed in the inability of themselves and their sensibilities. These aspects hinder access to levels of consciousness, allowing the human being to have difficulties in relating to what can be considered immutable, permanent and essential in humanity (Pires, 2005).

The body as a theme in the visual arts receives certain prominence, since it inspires *embodiment* of creation. However, some cultures adopt the body as an object of art, in which, while it gives support to visuals, it is space for aesthetic experience. Among the most varied artistic languages that articulate expressive means and methods, the proposals that insert the body of the artist as work of art emerge as vanguards in the beginning of the 20th century. According to Barbosa (2010), the beginning of Contemporary Art is closely linked to the emergence of Body Art and Performance, '[...] configured in futuristic serenades, the aggressive and sarcastic presentations made by Dadaists and Surrealists' (Barbosa, 2010, p. 1201).

In this study, the focus is on the appropriations of the body in Marina Abramović's performances and Elke Hering's sculptural work. Abramović borrows the body in performance actions, configuring powerful performances, which consider the body as the main material in symbolic and existential relation to space. Hering developed extensive research in sculptural language, using various materials, and, by using bronze, she borrowed the human form to develop her mysterious sculptures. We will analyze in this text the phase in which Hering explored the body as creative material, executing works that refer to bodily forms.

According to Barbosa (2010, p. 1201), the performance consists of a language of the Visual Arts that established itself in artistic practices in the 1960s and sought to 'defetishize' the human body through interventions in

public spaces. This modality suppressed the cult of apparent beauty to attribute to the body its '[...] perishable biological [dimension], while at the same time it is a vehicle for representing symbolic thought that fosters cultural meanings'.

In this dimension of the body, we seek the artistic potentialities in the body poetics present in the production of these artists, paying attention to the possible approximations, connections, distances and perceptions configured by the visual limits. In this way, the boundaries and divergences of artistic approaches allow space for thinking about creative proposals and educational possibilities in art. The structure of this course establishes reverberations in the field of art, organized in introduction, conceptualization of languages, brief historical (contextual and biographical) of the artists, analysis of selected works and final considerations.

The Body as Theme and Place in/of Art

The duality between the natural and the artificial also permeates the themes of art and the body, evoking the dubiousness between nature and creation. It is in the body that culturally established conditions reproduce existential and behavioral patterns for a globalized social dynamic '[...] in which the survival of proper characteristics is increasingly difficult, whether being them individual and social, where everything is disposable and changeable [...]' (Pires, 2005, p. 18). The social being responds to the mercantilism of the bodies and can be modified as economic standards are dictated. To Foucault (1995, p. 152): 'A disciplined body is the prerequisite of an efficient gesture'.

These concepts refer to mechanisms of social control, using the symbols and iconographies represented by the images, which become powerful resources for maintaining the behavioral conditions in society. If the vision is the sense that offers us the first meanings of the world, we must also consider that the first form through which we perceive the other

[...] is linked to the image. Once we capture it, this is analyzed and 'codified' according to the sociocultural elements that each of us has. This process produces, almost immediately, depending on the quality of the

intensity of sensation, a rational elaboration of the individual relative to the other (Pires, 2005, p. 20).

In this context, the body, as matter that has three-dimensionality, is present in artistic creation, inspiring creations with different techniques, languages and hybrid proposals. 'Art is the projection of human thought and creativity, and it is connected with the history of humanity, questioning, revealing and pursuing the anxieties of civilization' (Moreira, 2012, p. 29).

When adopting visuals as creative material, especially in the visual arts, we will have the image of the body present as a theme. It presents itself in various artistic languages, be it drawings, paintings or sculptures, installations or ceramics, recreating images that approach reality with a greater or lesser degree of allusion to the human form (Pires, 2005). We enter the field of three-dimensionality in art, which interests us here, as we adopt the work in sculptural language as a reflexive focus. The use of the *three-dimensional* term in art is classically established as work that has height, width and depth (Moreira, 2012).

To Moreira (2012), the three-dimensionality extrapolates these classic patterns mentioned, establishing itself as a concept. Its meaning encompasses expressive manifestations in the field of art, which connects in various aspects to '[...] artistic materiality and spatiality'. This spatial reference makes the expansion of perceptions that relate '[...] to issues such as space/time, aesthetics, expression and composition' possible (Moreira, 20012, p. 26). In this way, the characteristic diversity of contemporary art is marked by hybrid intensities and dialogues between languages. According to Moreira (2012, p. 28),

[...] in contemporaneity, three-dimensionality in art encompasses works in the artistic practices of modeling, molding, joining and sculpting, inserted in artistic categories such as sculpture, ceramics, contemporary objects and movements such as installation and Land art.

When directing our attentive eye to the historical facts in the sculptural language, we notice the need to understand icons of this artistic modality in order to make connections with the local sculpture. Classical sculpture brings forth proportions and patterns of beauty that represent mythical ideals, at the suggestion of certain perfection of bodies. In Roman,

religious and Renaissance contexts we find specific features and ways in sculpture, such as narrative sculpture. This style comprises those works that suggest a history, a character or a cultural context. Thus, '[...] all sets of meanings can be revealed through the observer who identifies him/herself with his/her own experiences (of pain or pleasure) or with the perception of apprehending a new gesture or feeling' (Moreira, 2012, p. 30).

The main modern rupture and a dividing mark in sculptural language were put into practice by the '[...] Frenchman Auguste Rodin (1840-1917), who, through the finishing, often crude, and the twist of his figures reveals to us the importance of the expression' (Moreira, 2012, p. 30).

Another exponent of three-dimensionality and also of contemporary art was the artist Pablo Picasso (1881-1973). With a versatile personality, he transited through various languages, such as painting, sculpture and ceramics. Picasso elicited the observer's eye, proposing the idea that the sculpture could receive other configurations, considering the absence of matter. In this way, '[...] the volumes can be added by the human eye, which complements the work and creates the desired profile. The void spaces are impregnated with the invisible' (Moreira, 2012, p. 29).

In this anti-narrative logic, another icon in the sculpture was the artist Constantin Brâncuși (1876-1957). He proposed

[...] the simplification of form, even fading the pure visual element away, like cylinders and spheres, that toast to the abstraction and invite to the contemplation of the surface of the sculpture, valuing the material and the technique used. In the sculptures of Brâncuși, a distinctive look is proposed, beauty focused on the original form, on the unity and simplicity, without losing the essence of the work (Moreira, 2012, p. 30).

Taking into account this abstract tendency in sculpture, we must mention other contemporary exponents. Vladimir Tatlin (1885-1953) inserts the sculpture in another category, involving the space as support of creation. With it, the first initiatives of space appropriation as an artistic element were inaugurated, establishing what later would receive the name of installation art. We also mention Marcel Duchamp's radicalism (1887-1968), when transposing everyday objects into the field of art. This artist vehemently questions the role of art in a context of existential hopelessness and social flaws. Linked to the Dada movement, the artist uniquely exposes

a porcelain urinal which he called *Fontaine* (Fountain), developing the presuppositions of conceptual art, in which the artist would not have to make art, but to define what could be art. A concept and an idea could be valued as works of art (Moreira, 2012).

The expansion of contemporary art foreshadows the infinite expansion of possibilities for artistic creation, as well as the hybrid possibilities that can be configured. Concomitantly with this world context, we can make connections with the work of the artist from Santa Catarina in focus, Elke Hering, regarding her contemporary character of production, experimentation of materialities, themes and versatility that dialogue with avant-garde artistic movements.

According to Schwartz (2013), when Hering moved from rigid to malleable material, she produced sculptural structures coated with *Plavinil* (a type of vinyl), which refer to the anthropophagic period, American Pop Art, represented in the works of Claes Oldenburg. In addition to abstract bronze sculptures, Hering produced monumental outdoor sculptures, filled with symbology. In the early 1990s, she started producing crystal sculptures, material that she explored with the thematic body.

The body is endowed with matter, with the presence of the sensible; it is a place of senses; a place where inside we locate the sensations. These arise in the physical body and, when provoked by any aesthetic condition, take cognitive proportions that construct referentials on what it is external to us. It is through the body that what exists in us is manifested in actions (Pires, 2005).

When Joseph Beuys attempts, in 1965, to explain pictures to a dead hare, he establishes a performatic ritual that reflects his condition in the world. Both this performance, entitled *How to Explain Pictures to a Dead Hare*, and *Coyote – I Like America and America Likes Me*, performed in the United States in 1974, intend to cathartically transpose his existential condition into a ritualistic dimension (Bortulucce, 2013). The artist transposes the limits of artistic conventions adopting perishable materials such as fat, felt and honey, which have meaning in his life trajectory when he experienced the horrors of war. 'His works speak of an inner war, quieter, the one fought within men' (Bortulucce, 2013, p. 415).

One of the main characteristics of performance is concretizing the action in the present time. The moment of action takes place in real time, creating a ritualistic character in the communion with the spectator. Thus, the boundaries between stage and audience dissolve, and the essentially aesthetic relationship becomes ritualistic and mythical, shifting the dimensions of reception/interaction (Cohen, 2007).

When we see the performance as expressive artistic language, which includes movements of rupture with the established art, we notice that it allows openings and ways to consider elements that were not adopted as art. Thus, this vast field challenges the understandings of the boundaries between life and art (Cohen, 2007). According to the author, the performance presents intense hybridization regarding the appropriation of various materials from the visual arts, theater, dance and music in the contemporary times. It adopts technology and media possibilities as a performance element. Another characteristic is to privilege the *how* and the *what*. With this rupture, the historical narrative is in the background and what matters is how the performative action is being executed. 'This intention reinforces one of the main characteristics of performance art and of all live art, which is to reinforce the moment and break with the representation' (Cohen, 2007, p. 66). According to the author:

The performer, while acting, polarizes between the roles of actor and the 'mask' of the character. The point is that the role of the actor is also a mask. And it is important to clarify this notion; when a performer is on scene, he is composing something, he is working on his 'ritual mask' that is different from his day-to-day persona. In this sense, it is not permissible to say that the performer is the one who 'plays himself' rather than representing the character (Cohen, 2007, p. 58).

The existing studies in the field of performance diverge as to the origins that establish this manifestation as contemporary artistic language. The main references appear in the 1960s and 1970s, resulting from interdisciplinary practices that group different languages and conceptual art (Melin, 2008). Jackson Pollock receives prominence in the development of this language, since he

[...] launches the idea that the artist must be the subject and object of his/her work. There is a transference of the painting to the act of painting as an art object. From this new concept, the physical movement of the artist will gain

importance during his 'staging'. [...]. The artist will pay attention to the way his/her body instrument is used, his/her interaction with the space-time relationship and its connection with the public (Cohen, 2007, p. 44).

The concept of body instrument triggered artistic movements such as happening, body art and action painting, the latter developed and explored by the artist Jackson Pollock. In body art, '[...] the artist is the subject and object of his art (instead of painting, sculpting something, he places himself as a living sculpture). The artist becomes active, acting as a performer (scenic artist)' (Cohen, 2007, p. 30). Artists such as Allan Kaprow, Wolf Vostell, Claes Oldenburg and Andy Warhol began to experiment performative dynamics of artistic creation.

Among the artists who began to explore performances, Marina Abramović started in the 1970s. She '[...] dares to take her body to the physical limits to reach a full spiritual experience' (Melin, 2008, p. 19). In Brazil, experiments involving the body started with artists such as Lygia Clark (*Os Bichos* [The animals]), Hélio Oiticica (*Os Parangolés* – experiment that presents fusion of colors, structures, dances, words, photographs and music) and Lygia Pape (*O Ovo* [The egg]), in the 1960's. *Os parangolés*, by Hélio Oiticica, included the spectator in the work through a total '[...] adherence of the body to the work and to the work in the body' (Melin, 2008, p. 23).

By adopting the body as the main expressive material for performance actions, the themes addressed have origins in human flaws, social critique, existential drama, questioning about the ideals of beauty, consumerism, thus constituting territories of subversion and resistance (Barbosa, 2010). Performance opens the way to question everyday life, space-time and contemporary conditioning, not restricting itself to the use of organic, artificial, body fluids (saliva, sperm, feces and menstrual fluid) as aesthetic potency. The artist's body in performance becomes the main channel of communication and presents itself, it does not represent. This overlapping of codes challenges the established culture in a metaphorical and symbolic game, bringing to the eye of the observer possibilities of new perspectives of existential reflection.

Hybridity as a characteristic of performance suggests the smallest possibilities for aesthetic experiments in times and spaces that can subvert

the pre-established cultural order, imposed and reproduced by the social mechanisms of alienation. In this sense, we provoke ourselves to look at the two artists: what aesthetic approaches do they present to the body in its artistic productions?

Marina Abramović and her Provocations

Marina Abramović was born in the 1940s, just like Elke Hering, more precisely in 1946, in the city of Belgrade, the capital of Serbia. As a child, art brought her aesthetic experiences, impelling a certain tendency towards artistic creation. Her family became involved with the local culture because of some political positions they occupied, which allowed Abramović to develop her sensitivity to the artistic languages. Her mother ran an institute responsible for supervising historical monuments and also for acquiring works of art for public places (Abramović, 2017). Considering the sacred art, her mother assigned a space in her apartment so that Marina could create artistically. The first experiences were with painting. She painted pictures about her dreams, realizing, from the age of 6 or 7, that she would be an artist (Abramović, 2017).

A specific fact triggered Abramović's perception that the process of artistic creation is more important than the result, which would later lead her to conclude that performance means more than the object of art. The performance principle, to Abramović, came about when Filo Filipovic (1924-1994) performatively cut a piece of canvas and spread it on the floor. 'He opened a can of glue and threw the liquid on the canvas; he added a little bit of sand, some yellow pigment, some red pigment, and some black. Then he poured about half a liter of gasoline on it, lit a match, and everything exploded. 'This is a sunset', he told me. And he left' (Abramović, 2017, p. 41).

In search of materialities for creation, she realized that the body is essential material in art. Painting no longer offered the freedom she sought. In her words, Abramović describes the quest for freedom and creation:

Suddenly, the idea occurred to me, why painting? Why should I limit myself to two dimensions, when I could make art from absolutely anything: fire, water, human body? Anything! There was something like a click in my mind: I realized that being an artist meant having immense freedom. If I

wanted to create something from dust or rubbish, I could do it (Abramović, 2017, p. 41-42).

The intensification of the corporal presence as the field of the creative process became a priority in her search for performative possibilities. On square canvases of a meter and a half she painted symbolic, unrealistic clouds that resembled peanuts floating in monochromatic fields. In this process, Abramović reports: 'Sometimes in these clouds there appeared a body: the nude of a big old lady who used to model at the academy, always seen from behind. Sometimes she would transform into the landscape' (Abramović, 2017, p. 56).

From the Academy of Fine Arts to her performance as an artist, there were several studies, until she really understood that performance was her essence. The first performance proposal was designed to take place in 1969 at the Belgrade Youth Center. It was entitled *Come wash with me* and involved the audience. The idea was to install laundry tanks around a gallery in the Youth Center. When people entered the gallery, they would take off their clothes and Abramović would wash them, dry them and iron them. When leaving, they could dress clean clothes. The action was rejected by the Youth Center (Abramović, 2017).

On a trip to Edinburgh in 1973, Abramović planned her first performance called *Rhythm 10*. This proposal consisted of performing rhythmic movements of knives between the fingers with the hand extended on a white surface. As she performed, she recorded the sounds. When the artist cut herself, she would move to the next knife. After cutting herself twenty times, she heard the recorded sounds and attempted to repeat the same movements (Abramović, 2017). This performance impacted the audience, as it explored the physical and mental limits, allowing an organic connection between the audience and the artist. This proposal was conducted and boosted her career, as her experience reached states of bodily expansion in relation to time, space and the perception of a certain sensitive/invisible substance that permeated her body in the process. In the words of the artist,

[...] when we step into the space of a performance, we begin to act from a higher self, it is no longer about yourself. It's not about the you that you know. It's something else. [...]. I had experienced absolute freedom – I had



felt that my body was without boundaries, limitless; that pain didn't matter at all – and it intoxicated me (Abramović, 2017, p. 73-74).

Throughout the decades, the artist has produced numerous performances, and among them are some of the most intriguing artistic proposals that have provoked singular experiences in contemporary art. In *Rhythm 5*, 1974, the artist laid down in a space in the middle of a structure of wood and set it on fire. In *Rhythm 4*, also in 1974, Abramović crouched in front of a high powered industrial fan and tried to fill her lungs to the limit. In *Rhythm 2*, in the same year, the artist sat before the audience with two pills, one for catatonic people and another for schizophrenics. She took one, expecting the effects, which were from tremors to spasms, lasting approximately one hour; and then she took the other.

In 1975, Abramović performed her highest-risk performance, *Rhythm 0*, which became one of the most famous acts at the Galleria Studio Morra in Naples. The artist provided a table with 72 items, among them were sharp objects and a loaded pistol. She was exposed to the public for six hours, who could interact with her body in any way they wanted.

Abramović is the greatest icon in the language of performance and her production highlights the potential of the body as an element of performance creation. The relation of body presence, space, time and performative objects are at the heart of Abramović's research. The artist provokes polemics by testing the bodily limits in art and by using the body as a form of expression, whatever the performative action is. It causes discomfort and awkwardness, consistent with the concepts of contemporary art. According to the artist, in an interview with the newspaper *El País*: 'Expose myself just for exposing, who cares [...]', the performance '[...]' conveys a concrete energy and opens awareness. Salvation is in simplicity' (Mantilla, 2014).

Abramović still produces performance work at her New York headquarters, as well as she makes films and other artistic endeavors. Her performances have already been executed by other people. An example of collaborative actions was in the exhibition *The artist is present*, held in the Museum of Modern Art (MoMA) in 2010, containing fifty works, from interventions, installations, photographs and performances (Biesenbach, 2010).

Performance as a language generates heated discussions in search of definitions, so if art is not provocative, it is not art. Abramović is nothing more than a provocation. According to Cohen (2007), performance is a scenic expression, requiring the presence of the body in action to be fulfilled, constituted also as a theatrical language. In contrast, Melin (2008) states that performance belongs to the visual arts, contemplating extensive production and characteristics that legitimize its concept.

Perhaps the misconceptions of contemporaneity are set in trying to define something where there is no need for definitions, but for understanding. Many people seek a category to try to explain what is not to be explained. The provocative look here is the place or the no place of performance, as opposed to the possibility of framing and attempting to categorize this language. We prefer to look at the aesthetic potency contained in a performative action in artistic creation, as well as to consider the freedom of combinations of artistic languages such as dance, music, images, alternative media.

Elke Hering's Creative Path

Hering's artistic trajectory is marked by versatility and creation, due to the appropriation of various materials. She was born in 1940 in Blumenau, Santa Catarina state, Brazil. From a traditional family, descended from pioneers in the textile industry, she grew up having access to knowledge, art and erudite culture. Her attitude toward life was of simplicity and humanity. As a child, she showed inclination toward the visual arts.

When the city of Blumenau received, in 1956, the construction of the monumental *Igreja São Paulo Apóstolo* (St. Paul Apostle Church), designed by the architect Gottfried Boehm, it also received a visit from Lorenz Johanes Heilmair (visual artist), who executed the project of the stained glass which is still in existence. When Hering learned that the artist was in town, she presented him with her drawings. On that occasion, the artist invited her to assist in the execution of the stained-glass windows that make up the visual of the Church.

In 1958, Hering began her artistic education at the Academy of Fine Arts in Munich (Germany). There, she specialized in sculpture, receiving outstanding mention for her works. When she returned to Brazil in the

1960s, she experienced a period of artistic residency in Bahia, with the sculptor Mario Cravo, with whom she learned to manipulate metals for the creation of sculptures. Her education path was also marked by experiments and investment in the search for materials that best expressed her innovative spirit. She moved between several artistic languages and was a sculptor, drawer, recorder, painter, becoming a reference in art from Santa Catarina and in national sculpture. In 1969, she got married to the poet Lindolf Bell, with whom she had three children.

In the early 1970s, Hering traveled to the United States, where she discovered a kind of malleable plastic called *plavinil* (vinyl). This material allowed the creation of abstract sculptures with children's themes. Her versatility and originality with abstract appeal showed the artist's pioneering spirit. Hering was thus one of the first artists in southern Brazil to explore abstract experiences and object sculptures with pop appeal, coated with *plavinil* (Schvartz, 2013).

From the 1980s, the artist intensely explored bronze and materials such as cement, iron, plastic, plaster, aluminum. She experimented with a kind of integration between sculpture and painting, which she called 3D painting. In the last decade of her production, she experimented with crystal, producing a series of sculptures with this material. The works produced with iron sought to re-signify the objects of daily life, transforming them into artistic productions that allowed approximations with modern and contemporary art (Schvartz, 2013).

Hering became more and more established as an artist ahead of her time for her creative trait and use of diversified materials. Her works were exhibited in more than 10 national art galleries and two São Paulo Art Biennials, between the years of 1965 and 1972. She participated in numerous individual exhibitions in the main centers of the country and abroad. Because of these intense creations, the artist received prominence in national and international newspapers and magazines.

Hering achieved high aesthetic levels in her works, which were opposed to academicism, showed Brazilian singularities and dialogued symbolically with modernist artists. Her original poetics emanated from her creative spirit as a contemporary sculptor (Schvartz, 2013). The artist produced intensely for over 30 years, moving freely between rigid materials,

such as iron; and malleable, such as *plavnil*. In her works of painting, naturalistic regional elements stand out, resembling the works of the Brazilian modernist Tarsila do Amaral and the Dutchman Piet Mondrian (Schvartz, 2013).

The artist produced poetic experiments integrating visual arts and poetry, conceptually approaching international constructivism, concretism and Brazilian neo-concretism.

To Schvartz (2013, p. 31): 'The transformation of everyday materials into a sculptural unity did not seek to give visibility only to a fragment, but to the composed entirety of these parts'. This reveals her spirit wholly focused on the artistic work. To Hering, the work of art means '[...] the synthesis of the whole emotional, rational, philosophical and mystical moment' (Schvartz, 2013, p. 32). Hering's studies and experiences with European artists and cultures allowed her to build a certain mystical view of life and also influenced her creative journey. Hering believed in a kind of *truth of the artist* to refer to the consistency of the meaning and the artistic *sincerity* attributed to each created work (Schvartz, 2013). On one occasion, in an interview with a local newspaper, Hering made clear her esoteric vision of life and a genuinely artist spirit:

What we are here, a piece of matter, a piece of cosmic dust that lives, that is born, grows, dies, and it is over. I always had a lot against all this, I thought there was always something else so that art is [for me] especially this something else (Schvartz, 2013, p. 46).

Elke Hering emerges as one of the best sculptors in the state of Santa Catarina. Her work dialogues with human issues that embrace the reflection of the local and world existential condition. From the rigid metal to the malleable plastic and to the delicate crystal, Hering reached the stage of contemporary artist, ahead of her time, for her vast contribution to the visual arts in the state of Santa Catarina and Brazil. She died early, victim of cancer, in 1994, in Blumenau.

When Abramović and Hering Make Poetry

What can be seen and can separate the outside from the inside – the skin as the locus of sensations and a sign of what is visible and sensitive. What the skin hides is also evident in the gesture of the body that

communicates through movement. This gesture is the ‘most radical testimony of something that is happening to us and that we can share our being with one another’ (Meira 2003, p. 23) and with the world. ‘When one speaks of the body as an art object, one commonly thinks of a possible representation of transcendence; an implicit reference is made to the unique, sovereign, timeless image of the body in all its beauty’ (Jeudy, 2002, p. 17). In Jeudy’s words we perceive the dubiousness of the body in art.

[...] the body is both the subject and the object of representations. What I feel, what I learn, what I memorize, all sensations, perceptions interfere with the images of my body, which is both the possibility and the condition of what I experience and of my ways of interpreting what I experience (Jeudy, 2002, p. 20).

In this reflective space, we adopt the body as a trigger of dialogues in art and the place of expansion of the performative possibilities. In this way, we evoke with Jeudy (2002, p. 76): ‘That the body be taken as the origin of the origins or by what is revealed to us of the Being, by what preserves, in short, its mystery and makes of it what makes speech indefinitely possible, such is the weapon of aesthetic idealism’. Let us then proceed towards the analysis of the works selected for this study.

Two works by the artists mentioned in this study are analyzed from the perspective of the body as support and thematic in art. By Abramović, we selected the performance *Rhythm 0*, 1975. By the Santa Catarina sculptress, we adopted a work present at the *Museu de Arte de Blumenau* (MAB), called *Memória arqueológica* (Archeological Memory), 1990. The reasons that determined this decision are closely linked to the elements that define the creation process: the two works present the body in performance in the execution, but differ in the final result.

This relation with contemporary art and with the use of the body allows us to affirm that there are approximations with Abramović’s work. In the performance *Rhythm 0* (Figure 1), 1975, Abramović exposed her body so that the public could use it as a support, interfering directly, creating marks, leaving traces. The visitor, in his/her contemplation, had the role of accepting his/her human condition and feeling the need to register his/her action through his/her own stimuli.



Figure 1 – *Performance Rhythm 0*, 1975. Source: Pinterest.com (2016).

On a table, the artist arranged 72 objects that could offer pain or pleasure. Among the objects were lipstick, wine, grapes, scissors, fork, knife, whip, and a gun loaded with a bullet. The public was invited to do to her whatever they wished. The performance lasted for six hours. Initially, the public acted with caution, modesty, and, gradually, actions of violence started appearing when treating the body as an object, tearing her clothes, piercing her skin and also aiming the weapon. The performance awakened attention to human behavior, evidencing the instinctive and violent character of being. Aspects such as tyranny, superiority, and domination appeared to suggest elements of human nature.

In the language of the artist, we can observe three aspects that are present in her actions: a) the body as a fundamental element, fully inserted in art in relation to expansion of time/space; b) objects and materials depending on the performative proposal, establishing a dialogue with the observer; c) environment and body as an object and, at the same time, support of art. The proposal brought into the eyes of the public the symbol of the body itself, restoring the original power of sensitivity and vulnerability (Jeudy, 2002, p. 80).

In the idea of the body as a simulacrum of itself in the appropriation of its forms for artistic creation, the sculpture of Hering emerges at this moment. In the 1980s, Hering began producing works inspired by human forms with specific materials, such as bronze, concrete and crystal (Schvartz, 2013). In 1990, she executed one of her most enigmatic works – a rectangular box in plaster with the impression of objects and her body (Figure 2).



Figure 2 – *Memória Arqueológica* and details, 1990. Plaster and Sand. 2,20m high x 1,30m wide.
Source: Photographs taken in the *Museu de Arte de Blumenau*. Authors' collection.

In this work, we perceive that the body becomes an object of art to the point that the artist uses it as the generator of perceptible forms, in an attempt to configure a fossilized simulacrum of human existence. A kind of performative record printed in plaster, suggesting the marks of man's action in the world. The work, displayed vertically in a main hall of the galleries of the *Museu de Arte de Blumenau*, requires a level of attention and keen perception to be appreciated. From a distance, the work apparently does not attract attention, except for its dimensions (2.20m high and 1.30m wide). However, as we approach and stare, the forms reveal themselves, catching the observer's attention in the probable evidence that the artist used her own body to print the forms contained in the work. This brings us back to the fact that man leaves his marks in the contexts in which he lives. This is perhaps one of the meanings in which the artist has accomplished this work (It is important to note the scarcity of records about the artist from Blumenau and her creative processes). According to Schwartz (2013), in order to create her works, Hering selected materials that best expressed her avant-garde artistic attitude. The art critic Harry Laus analyzed the artist's creative process and stated:

They try to approach the unknown, the dimension that escapes our understanding, whose search gives greatness to the human being because it expands beyond our physical content. This intuitive part, transcending a neglected contemplation – adds value to the act of creation and includes the meaning of the word artist (Laus, 1985, p. 2).

The sculptures created for the public space are inserted directly into the daily life and dialogue intensively with the observer, due to its symbolic



character (Schvartz, 2013). Her work of avant-garde character dialogues in several aspects with the contemporary art, due to the use of materials and the theme.

The parallel that the works analyses previously established, is precisely in the main element for its artistic creation: the body. In the first analysis, the body is configured as a support for performance. In the second case, we perceive the body used as a matrix of printed forms substantially in plaster, composing a three-dimensional work.

The realization that it is in the body that meanings are culturally given and constituted offers subsidies to affirm that from it comes the creative inspiration in the proposal of the two artists. We therefore confirm and recognize that, through a sovereignty of the body, all cultures are sustained and perpetuated through time. 'If there is culture, it is the body that expresses it' (Jeudy, 2002, p. 76).

As we enter into this discussion and sharpen our eyes to the potentialities found in the two works of art, we notice that they clearly provoke reflexive reactions around body culture and social mechanisms of control. One of the main crises of contemporaneity lies in accepting the other in its diversity and culture. Accepting the other has relations with the perception of their singularities in a human and existential dimension. Perhaps the difficulty is to stop perceiving the body of another in the same way as any object. If we consider that '[...] the body of the Other is a cultural product, just like any other object. What we call cultural integration is no more than a way of assimilating the body as a cultural commodity' (Jeudy, 2002, p. 76).

In this sense, art, in this case sculpture (if we can call such object as sculpture) and performance, suggests a wide possibility of creative actions that awaken reflection around the body and socially established cultural conditioning. According to Meira (2003), in the understanding of culture itself, we can perceive the poetic making as a subversive act of resistance to trade and deflation of values. Through art, perhaps we can '[...] turn our eyes to what is at hand, in the body, in the corporeality of the space of gesture and human activity' (Meira, 2003, p. 18).

The body is political. It is in the body that things happen, therefore, we cannot fail to report the importance of the manifestation of the body in

creative processes that are contemplated in works of art, whether in materiality or not. The relevance of this moment is to emerge possible discussions for aesthetic mediations around the body and the mazes of creation.

When speaking of body in art, we place ourselves beyond market visuals that influence ways of recognizing forms and feel what it means to be alive. Abramović and Hering, when seeking sensitive relationships of creation, with various materialities, dialogue viscerally, proposing conceptual and metaphorical crossings. Even with geographical and cultural distances, in distinct creative processes, without face-to-face contact, they produced art from the body on a similar aesthetic connection level. When directing the body as a theme and support, they understand its cultural value and represent its main inspirational material for artistic creation.

By using the body to be performatively printed, Hering proposed the crossing of languages. Her work shows a versatile path, using body performance to produce visuality. In the performance, Abramović puts us in a labyrinth of interpretive possibilities, which allows a connection with Hering's mystic labyrinths. In both cases, the body is the main protagonist. We cannot deny its existence, which suggests social criticism in the history of art, which allows us to create inquiries about what only this body can say, communicate, transcend and share knowledge. Thus, we dare to affirm that the works of the artists raise in their poetic proposals reverberations for social contexts whose corporations are permeated by the cultural meanings. If the marks on the bodies are cultural constructions, bodily actions are the result of existential experiences. The aesthetic perception, in art, that it is verified in actions of creation or in moments of exalted appreciation, can be triggered in the dimension of the sensorial elaborations, in the construction of senses, something that Larrosa (2016) brings us as experience. To him:

If experience is what happens to us and if the knowledge of experience has to do with the elaboration of meaning or non-sense of what happens to us, it is about a finite knowledge, connected to the existence of an individual or of a human community in particular. Or, in an even more explicit way, it is about a knowledge which reveals to the concrete and singular man, individually or collectively regarded, the meaning or non-sense of his own existence, of his own finitude (Larrosa, 2016, p. 30).



The works adopted in this study suggest approximations and inspirations in what concerns the development of problematizing practices of the various cultural contexts that allowed to enhance the humanizing sensitivity in the dimension of the bodies. In this way, we can affirm that the corporeal imagery potency, in Abramović and Hering, destabilizes the standards established by an immediate culture. In this sense, their works open space for temporal, sociocultural ruptures referring to the contemporary aspect of the information culture. This excess of information suspends us from reality and aborts what the existential human experience would be, exposing bodies to so many things in a dynamic of conditioning, which makes the experience increasingly rare (Larrosa, 2016). In this way, we identify as the aesthetic potency, symbolized by the creative act, what is most sacred in the human being: the vital energy, body matter, whether it is performatized by the body in space/time, printed in various materialities, recorded by the photograph or embodied in the sculpture.

Considerations on the Process

To finish this process marked by the poetic intensities of the artists, we perceive the body as simulacrum and potency of artistic creation. Being the form of creative material or the body itself as support, the poetic conditions reveal what remains in us as human essence. In the body, as agent of relations with the world, lies the field of sensations, where the potencies of sensibility will always be present.

The similarities between the works and the artists converge in the sense of provoking the structuring of performance actions, starting from themes of our time (or the contexts in which they lived), showed and developed from a collective perspective, taking into account the dynamics between time/space, social criticism, existential dramas, questioning about the ideals of beauty, consumerism and subversive territories of resistance. The aesthetic experiences in artistic creation and experimentation can offer the possible esthesia, considered as potency of human sensibility. This potency of sensitivity could perhaps be the communion of the intelligible with the sensitive as the field of construction of knowledge about the human being and the dynamics in collectivity.



We perceive in art alternatives of approach to sensitivity and cognition. In this way, denying the emotional dimension and the sensitivity of bodies can be the denial of dimensions that make us human. The construction of corporeities in the denial of human sensibility defines a certain human problematic in the contemporaneity, in which it is the responsibility of perceiving the other and also recognizing oneself in the other.

The dialogues that we establish with the artists in their works are beyond the thematic category and object of art. They provoke the public eye, shift perceptions about human conditions, and awaken reflective states that affect being in the world. The aesthetic potency that emerges from the artistic proposals of Abramović and Hering transcends cultural and temporal boundaries, moving beyond social conventions and breaking them.

The poetic *between* of art as the generating potency of actions for the reflection of human education consists of a complex task that requires study, understanding and curatorial sensitivity to adopt different perspectives in the construction of experiences. This study instigates the experimentation of performance and reflections on what comes to be or not contemporary sculpture. Are there limits and approximations between languages? In our time, does so many categories make sense? We do not have answers, we do have more questions, provoked by the works that elevate our reflective capacities around the body. Without the body it is impossible for art to exist, art is body, body is flesh, so art is visceral. If it does not affect the senses, if it does not cause tremors in the labyrinths of the mind, perhaps what is presented before our eyes is not in fact an artistic work.

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Carla Carvalho holds a PhD in Education from Universidade Federal do Paraná (UFPR), is a professor of Visual Arts at the Department of Arts of Universidade Regional de Blumenau (FURB) and of the Graduate Program in Education at FURB. Leader of the Research Group Art and Aesthetics in Education.

E-mail: ca_carvalho@icloud.com

Leomar Peruzzo is a Master's student in the Graduate Program in Education of Universidade Regional de Blumenau (FURB). He has a BA in Theater and a Teaching License in Visual Arts (FURB). Actor and visual artist. CAPES scholarship holder. Member of the Research Group Art and Aesthetics in Education.

E-mail: leomarperuzzo@hotmail.com

Pedro Gottardi is an art teacher at the Blumenau Municipal Network. He is taking an undergraduation license in Visual Arts at Universidade Regional de Blumenau (FURB). Visual artist and performer. PIBID scholarship holder. Member of the Research Group Art and Aesthetics in Education.

E-mail: pedro.gottardisc@gmail.com

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