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Squares on Stage: some aesthetic-political actions from the early 2010s

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ABSTRACT – Squares on Stage: some aesthetic-political actions from the early 2010s –

The beginning of the 2010s was marked by the bursting of major uprisings such as the Arabic Spring, the Occupy Wall Street, the June Days, among others. Despite the distinct contexts, most of these popular protests-demonstrations showed similarities – among them, a strong interaction between body, aesthetics and politics. The article proposes to highlight the performative aspect of these insurrections from examples that took place in squares around the globe.

Keywords: **Performance. Protest. Politics. Activism. Uprising.**

RÉSUMÉ – Places en Scène: quelques actions esthétique-politiques du début de la

décennie 2010 – Le début de la décennie 2010 a été marqué par l'éclosion de plusieurs manifestations telles que le Printemps Arabe, l'*Occupy Wall Street*, les Journées de Juin, entre autres. Malgré la différence de contextes, la plupart de ces manifestations populaires présentaient des caractéristiques similaires, parmi lesquelles une forte interaction avec le corps, l'esthétique et la politique. L'article propose de relever l'aspect performatif de ces insurrections à partir d'exemples qui ont eu lieu sur des places partout dans le monde.

Mots-clés: **Performance. Protestation. Politique. Activism. Soulèvement.**

RESUMO – Praças em Cena: algumas ações estético-políticas do início da década de

2010 – O início da década de 2010 foi marcado pela eclosão de grandes protestos, como a Primavera Árabe, o *Occupy Wall Street*, as Jornadas de Junho, entre outros. Apesar da diferença de contextos, a maior parte dessas manifestações populares apresentava características comuns, dentre elas uma forte interação entre corpo, estética e política. O artigo se propõe a destacar o aspecto performativo dessas insurreições, a partir de exemplos que ocorreram em praças do mundo todo.

Palavras-chave: **Performance. Protesto. Política. Ativismo. Levante.**



Form and Protest

The writing of history is crossed by a series of sudden and unforeseen movements that reorient the course of events. In this context, throughout the decades, popular protests have shown to be a form of active expression of these movements, being structured on an undeniable relationship between exhaustion, indignation, power and collectivity. In general, the protests and demonstrations reveal situations of inflammation that stage the confidence of a group to have reached its limit. What is at stake in these cases is not only individual suffering, but a shared feeling that some rights are not being respected and that citizens are being deprived of something essential to freedom or to a dignified life.

What characterizes an uprising? Rebellion, organized revolt, disorganized revolt, lack of quiet. These are some of the meanings for the word *upheaval*. The guidelines in a protest are countless. These might oppose a specific issue, such as a law, fiscal injustice, austerity policies, or rather come out as a reaction to a legal regime, such as, for instance, an uprising against the colonial regime, slavery, apartheid, authoritarian regimes, fascism and capitalism, among others.

Which visual, narrative and sensory aspects stand out in these events? The ways in which these protests are structured may also vary; one could notice posters, megaphones, sound cars, marches, the closing of avenues, the occupation of public spaces, vigils, cultural events, and so on. Formal modes of presentation deal with politics not only in a practical sense in the context of claims, but also as an aesthetic expression of the way of manifesting. Such perception evokes a sensitive and imagetic approach to protests, bringing to light a strong interaction between art and struggle.

Undoubtedly, an aspect that deserves to be highlighted in the insurrections of the early 2010s is the encounter between body, aesthetics and politics. This article proposes to observe some examples of contemporary protests, having as its major focus certain performative characteristics. Evidently, the concept of performance is quite broad and does not fit into a single definition, since it is a flexible and constantly changing system, which disrupts notions such as art, artist, action, work and scene. At first, Eleonora Fabião's idea of "performative will" will be

approached, being it understood as a process of “[...] denaturalization of habitats and their inhabitants, of the relationships between people, environment, thing and tradition” (Fabião, 2010, p. 8). This means that, more than the institutional acknowledgment of art as a title, what is at stake here is a creative way of observing and recreating everyday life, as well as the relationships that exist in the public sphere.

In addition to Fabião’s concept, the Rio de Janeiro 28 de Maio collective also proposes, in its *counter-manifesto*, a formulation expanded to the field of art theory through the concept of *aesthetic-political action*, which may help in the present debate. According to the group’s counter-manifesto, “[...] an aesthetic-political action is first and foremost an anti-capitalist action, that is, it is an action against the art market, a *counter-art action*” (Coletivo 28 de Maio, 2017, p. 1). This does not mean that its proponents ignore the art system, the theories of art, the philosophy of art or aesthetics. For them, more important than knowing whether we are artists or not, the urgency of the facts calls us to think about which networks are being built, which are the risk zones, what affects us and how we can affect others. What is at stake is precisely the zone of indiscernibleness and risk, which does not really allow us to know what it is all about. “Art or protest? Art or crime?” (Coletivo 28 de Maio, 2017, p. 2). Fabião’s perception of performative will and the conceptual elaboration of the 28 de Maio collective seem to meet the observed cases. However, before going into the actual examples, some of the context in which they are inserted is presented here.

Viral Wave of Protests

It can be said that the second decade of the 21st century was marked by an outbreak of protests across the world. In 2008, the collapse of Lehman Brothers Bank triggered a global crisis, which was felt in financial markets around the world. The stock markets collapsed, several banks announced billions in losses and the following months were of severe instability for the economy.

At the end of 2010, an unexpected event occurred in Tunisia. Mohamed Bouazizi, a street merchant, set his own body on fire after the police confiscated all his goods and asked for bribes. The iconic event was



seen as a trigger of the Tunisian Revolution, responsible for removing the hitherto President Ben Ali from power. Soon after, several countries in the Middle East and North Africa were able to witness a wave of popular protests that became popularly known as the Arab Spring.

In 2011, in Spain, Madrid's main square was occupied by the movements of the *indignados* de la Puerta del Sol, who demanded *real democracy ya!*. The protest had an impact in several cities of the country. In September of that same year, in the United States, protesters were at Zuccotti Park in New York as part of the Occupy Wall Street movement, declaring themselves as the *ninety-nine percent* (of the population), demanding a profound reform in the financial sector and the political class, which they considered as the *one per cent*. In addition to the events already mentioned, it is possible to mention the Green Movement in Iran, the *Geração à Rasca* in Portugal, the occupation of Sintagma Square in Greece, and the occupation of Taksim Square in Turkey. Similar protests also took place in Ukraine, Germany, Canada, Australia, Taiwan, South Korea, Japan, South Africa, Argentina, Chile, Brazil, totaling about 84 countries. From then, scholars, theorists and journalists would associate and connect these uprisings as if they were a global wave of protests.

Although the motivations and conditions that fomented the protests were the most diverse, with specific vindications in each area, certain characteristics seemed to be recurrent in various contexts in forms of similar struggles. Somehow it is as if structures, slogans, and ways of protesting went through a process of contagion. Henrique Soares Carneiro points to a "febrile and viral cosmopolitan synchrony" (Carneiro, 2012, p. 8) following rebellions. In fact, the expression "viralization" was often used to refer to these events, both in public space and in virtual space.

Dissatisfaction with the idea of representativity was a recurring theme in different cases. In the Arab countries, for instance, the uprisings demanded the dismissal of rulers after long periods under a dictatorial regime. In European countries, in the United States and in Latin America, this subject was presented through slogans as *he/she does not represent us* or slogans like *que se vayan todos!*, uttered spontaneously during popular protests in Argentina.



In addition to the rebellion against a certain democratic illusion and discomfort towards the leaders, the events in question presented a kind of catharsis, a consciousness of mutual solidarity and a political ecstasy, in which those involved felt part of a group process. Popular rebellion was once again a frequent topic in the lives of citizens, and comparisons with 1968 and even with older insurrections, such as the Spring of the Peoples in 1848, became usual.

In 2013, in Brazil, there was a series of demonstrations, which took place in the streets, squares and avenues of 12 capitals and other medium-sized cities, in a process that became known as the *Jornadas de Junho* (June Days). The movement, which at first seemed to be a reaction against the increase in the price of bus fees, soon triggered a number of other claims, such as outrage at the very high spending on the 2013 Confederations Cup and the 2014 World Soccer Cup, accusations against the poor quality of public services, the rise in inflation, denunciations of corruption issues and territorial, racial and gender struggles, revolt against brutal police violence, inside and outside the protest, the criminalization of social movements, among other topics.

The excess of demands, the heterogeneity of the protesters and the absence of a clear program and a well-defined leadership were recurrent in uprisings in Brazil and in the world. *What do you want, after all?* was a question directed to the protesters, critically denouncing the absence of a clear direction in the demonstrations. But if, on the one hand, the lack of defined programme in large collective actions could represent a massive movement, alienated and without reflection, on the other hand one could equally see these actions as the establishment of a sort of reaction to questions that were difficult to formulate, probably because the concepts used – such as democracy, freedom and rights – were in crisis and in conflict with the reality in which they were being developed.

The word *occupation* gained a considerable focus in the 2010s, being used in different contexts. During the demonstrations, slogans such as *Occupy everything* or *Occupy and resist* were highly disseminated. The demonstrators would move to a point in the city where they would stay for a while, a few hours and sometimes days. Some people would crowd into



camps. Although people would individually alternate, for a period of time they would propose to stay as part of a crowd.

Characterization and irreverence also appeared in different protests around the world. Elements such as glitter, hula hoops, LED lights, videos projected on buildings, costumes, instruments, as well as concerts and music festivals were seen in the street spaces, as if in some way the struggle were crossed by a festive trait. The collective struggle was celebrated and also produced, characterized, so as to maintain the effervescence of events, attract new participants and overcome the barriers of advertising. Appearing and making visible, transforming the cause in image, seeing the issue and showing it to the world, these were and still are issues which are very important to contemporary uprisings. But how to make a cause visible amidst the excessive flow of images and information of contemporary chaos? Taking into consideration the fact that certain concepts that are well consolidated in the vocabulary of the insurrections are in conflict with the reality in which they are presented, how can the languages of protests be reinvented?

It is in this context of aestheticization of the protests that we will highlight below some examples where there seems to be a certain performatization of the gestures of insurrection – sometimes more explicit, sometimes more concealed – that provoke a curiosity about the very act of protesting. The examples do not completely fall into the category of art, in the most institutional sense, to the extent that they are less palpable in their materiality, as would be the case of a musical show, for instance. But they also avoid a more obvious idea of manifestation, considering that they bring to the surface a creative kind of display. This borderline between one and the other is what is interesting for our approach. It is important to emphasize that this is only one possible cutout and that the choices made cannot possibly summarize or make a singular portrait of the relationship between protests and performance, amid a countless range of examples that keep multiplying. Still, these events bring some relevant points to this discussion of the notion of aesthetic-political action.



Some Examples

Applause Protests – Belarus – June and July 2011

Between June and July 2011, hundreds of people started clapping their hands and putting their mobile phones on vibrate every Wednesday at 7 p.m. as a means of expression against the power of President Alexander Lukashenko in Belarus. The movement began with a call for action on its Facebook page, *Revolution Through Social Networks*, but quickly spread (Dozens, 2011, online). The action offered no physical danger, neither to the participants nor to the opposition. However, after a month of protests, law enforcement officials announced strict restrictions on applause. Only war veterans or ex-soldiers could clap their hands and those who did not comply should be arrested. As a result, the authorities enforced limitations on the use of the Internet and independent websites could no longer be accessed by employees of public companies during working hours. The applause became a symbol of resistance and opposition.

Thriller – Chile – June 2011

An extremely political flash mob took place in June 2011 in Santiago, Chile. The action took place in the Plaza de la Constitución, in front of the Mint. About 2,000 students dressed as zombies danced to pop icon Michael Jackson's *Thriller* in honor of Chile's education. *Morí pagando mi Educación* was written on one of the posters held by a university student (En Chile..., 2011). In addition to this protest, which was widely disseminated by videos on YouTube, Chilean students explored several creative forms of claiming, such as artistic interventions in the streets, demands written on buses, among other things. The actions were usually structured through calls on Facebook, such as, for instance, a curious protest marathon, which was organized around the Mint, in which hundreds of students spent more than 270 hours running around the building. Humor and theatricality were striking features of these protests. These aspects played a key role in the dissemination of the events and showed that, despite all the pain and revolt, the fight could also be joyful and funny.

At that time, the country was experiencing one of the greatest manifestations in its history, since the end of its dictatorship in 1990. Thousands of students took to the streets and occupied schools and universities in order to demand quality public education and greater democratic participation. The protests of the students added strength to other social protests, which in one way or another questioned the neoliberal model, such as protests in favor of the redistribution of resources from the extraction of copper, protests in favor of the protection of the Mapuche Indians and protests in defense of sexual freedom.

Standing man – Turkey – June 2013

Another example that confused police and authorities happened in June 2013 in Turkey. Artist and choreographer Erdem Gündüz arrived at Taksim Square in Istanbul around six in the afternoon and stood until two in the morning when the police showed up to get him out. At first, Gündüz had made no announcement of his action. He just arrived and stood still in silence, looking forward to the Atatürk Cultural Center. The place was threatened with being transformed into a gigantic shopping center and this possibility encouraged protests.

In addition to defending the Cultural Center, Gündüz's action represented a peaceful provocation against the violent repression by Premier Recep Tayyip Erdogan, which had occurred against activists a week earlier in a park near Taksim. Five thousand people had been injured and at least four had died. The place had been closed as soon as the protests began and the police expelled the demonstrators, but pedestrians could enter. Gündüz took advantage of this breach to begin his action.

Right at the first hour, the police searched Gündüz's pockets and backpack and left, as there was nothing of relevance with him. Gündüz stayed and the passers-by started calling him *duran adam*, which means *standing man* in Turkish. Little by little, hundreds of people would adhere to the gesture, standing quietly, facing the same direction. After six hours, Gündüz was taken by the police, but he was not accused of any crime. The protest continued the next day. Ten people who refused to leave the square were arrested. The gesture was repeated in other cities and Gündüz's action was widely disseminated on the Internet. The hashtag #duranadam



dominated the Turkish Twitter and the police started to arrest people for their posts, alleging *false information*.

Untitled or E as pessoas na sala de jantar – Brazil – August 2013

In August 2013, in the Cinelândia square in Rio de Janeiro, actresses Ariane Hime and Fernanda Vizeu made a performative act amidst tear gas bombs thrown by the Military Police to disperse the demonstrators, during a protest in support to the teachers of the municipal network. At the time, they set up a kind of scenario with chairs and a dining table. They both wore gas masks, and, despite the smoke and the rush, they staged a dinner in front of a television set, as if they were alienated from the violent reality of the surroundings (Hime; Vizeu, 2016).

In addition to denouncing police truculence, this aesthetic-political action was a clear provocation to *official* media means such as television and newspapers, which would visibly refuse to show the barbarities carried out by the State or would discredit the legitimacy of the demonstrators, citing them as vandals and bad guys. In this sense, the performative action of the duo strongly criticized any belief that the institutional press shows the truth about the events. After all, while a portion of the citizens who go to the streets to fight for the rights of the population suffer repression with tear gas bombs and rubber bullets, another part remains in a state of anesthesia, influenced by large media companies that show nothing more than what suits them.

Ironically, after a video and a photo of the action were quickly broadcast on social networks, obtaining a large number of views, the newspaper Extra – a branch of one of the largest communication conglomerates in the country – made an article about the action, baptizing it as *E as pessoas na sala de jantar* (And the people in the dining room), in reference to the song *Panis et Circenses*, by the group Os Mutantes. Consequently, the critique of neglect was published precisely in the space of those that were criticized.

Unfolding on the cases

Regarding the four actions chosen, it is pertinent to say that the act of occupying a public space is absolutely corporeal and shows a link of

resistance. All these actions make evident a connection between people who insist on being together for their rights. In one way or another, the manifestations evoke ruptures in the system, to the extent that they provoke a disarray in the functional choreography of the streets and promote a meeting that comes precisely to question a productive chain. Whether in the space of the street or in the virtual space, the bodies become evident. And what does it mean to be part of a crowd? Of a growing crowd? How does the agglomeration of people in a public space affect the materiality of the space?

According to Judith Butler (2011, n. p.), in reference to the protests, “[...] the square and the street are not only the material supports for action, but they are part of any theory of public and corporate action that we can propose”. In this sense, the claim for public space goes beyond the struggle for space itself, being also a struggle for the bodies, for the visibility of the bodies, “a struggle against disrespect, abandonment and erasure” (Butler, 2011, n. p.). The gathering of people in a public space made visible not only the presence of bodies, but also the presence of bodies in relation (to each other, between speeches, between the city). “There is no body without the gaze of the other. One is never alone on the world stage” (Rivera, 2015, p. 302).

Despite the concrete relationship with the city, the internet is fundamental for the dissemination of protests similar to those cited here. What is the reason and what is the impact of making a performance protest in a concrete space, such as a square or a street, nowadays, when the strength of virtual space is so strong? How does virtual space affect these encounters and how is it affected by them? Is it still possible to make a distinction between these two spaces? In a certain way, virtual media also configure a place of encounter, which can be understood, in a certain way, as virtual squares.

It is important to emphasize that cyber activism today offers another relationship with space, allowing subjects to participate effectively in events, without being physically present. Through the screens of computers and cell phones, thousands of people act in different ways, such as, for instance, disclosing the place and time of the demonstrations, denouncing abuses by the State, promoting the search for lawyers, giving practical advice on how



to escape the police and how to make barricades, taking care of the coverage of events and dissemination of information and serving, many times, as an alternative to the official media. In front of social networks, the participants go through a transitory, contagious and immediate process.

Following the debate incited by the chosen actions, it is necessary to reaffirm the performative power of the gestures. In the act of applause in Belarus, for instance, the simple gesture of clapping hands – which is absolutely banal in everyday life –, when placed in context and relationship, acquires a power of meaning that confuses and frightens the authorities. The prohibition of applause reveals the absurdities of the legal system and the difficulty of the authorities in dealing with a form of protest that escapes a more traditional model of uprising, showing that what is at stake many times is not the violence of the demonstrators, but the criticism of power.

In a similar way, the peaceful – but not passive – gesture of Erdem Gündüz and the other Turkish citizens shakes institutional power, precisely because of its plurality of meanings. The gesture of remaining standing carries a discursive complexity that does not allow it to be framed in a single definition. At the same time, it provokes a knot, a silence and a difficulty of formulation that go beyond the action itself. Faced with the authoritarian force that represses, hundreds of people occupy a space that is rightfully theirs without saying anything, revealing the irony of reality. Without voice and without movement, the demonstrators speak in silence about what cannot be said. Together, they talk quietly about what needs to be said.

Following a formal way completely different from the case of Erdem Gündüz, the flash mob of Chilean students emerges. The choice of pop music and dance, as well as the adoption of makeup and zombie costume, leave no doubt about the intention of being provocative. Humor and theatricality show that protests do not just have to be hard and in combative language to be taken seriously. They can also be irreverent and festive. Often even this language attracts the attention and interest of potential participants.

The protest *E as pessoas na sala de jantar* also uses a formal choice that flirts with drama. By using the street in a warlike state as a stage for scenography, the performers claim the need for a more focused look at the

extreme situation that affects them, both in the public and private context. By representing a scene in the midst of chaos, the artists provoke a tension between the real and fiction and add a critical layer to the narratives that structure society – the danger of what is revealed and of what is distorted or hidden.

The list of examples at the beginning of the 21st century, in which performative aesthetics circumvent rules imposed by conservative instances and reveal the contradiction of the system, is immense. In addition to the aesthetic-political actions listed, there are many others that have been taking place over the last few years. It is likely that the performative phenomenon of the modes of insurgency is closely related to the ephemerality of our times. After all, it is precisely this short-lived point, so important to the very nature of performance, which prevents certain acts from being assimilated, decoded and explained by conservative logic, confusing and provoking the authoritarian instances.

The ephemerality not only as a temporal trait, but also spatial and corporal, as Ana Kiffer tells us. In an analysis of the 2013 protests, Kiffer refers to multiple bodies that arise, insurgent and unite in different places, for different causes: “[...] the ninja body, Black Blocks, bodies that resist on the front line to the absurd violence of the State, ‘gnocchi troop’ bodies, ‘the whole body is woman’, ‘every woman is a slut’, ‘every ass is secular’” (Kiffer, 2015, p. 35). According to the author, the bodies – individually or collectively – show something that can no longer be apprehended by a binary aesthetic. They deal with passages, with gestures and transience. Contemporary debates show that it is necessary to talk about the body, make the body visible, change the body, recognize the bodies.

The protests in question do not configure a collective event in the sense of a single identity or a single will. On the contrary, what the protests of the first decade bring of more disturbing is the relation with a series of multiplicities that become visible. In fact, most of the events discussed deal with the disappearance of the status of artist in a kind of process of becoming anonymous. The history of visibility in these cases is established by processes of social change and reinvention of language, perception, substances and forms at different scales. A series of events that explode in the social field and release new possibilities can be noticed; they create



existences and subjectivities, produce new discourses, new times, new implications and make it clear that it is necessary to create new modes of collective agency corresponding to the new subjectivities and, consequently, new ways of fighting.

It becomes difficult to analyze in a precise way the immediate legacies of each protest, in view of the temporal proximity to the period studied. It is impossible to say whether these protests were defeated or victorious in relation to their initial demands, not least because the heterogeneous character does not allow us to evaluate what is victory and defeat in different cases. On the eve of the 2020s, conservatism, control and fear have been spreading epidemically throughout Brazil and other countries, precisely after a period in which the world so vividly questioned the limits of democracy and representativity.

Even so, the aesthetic-political events in question provoke a reflection on the transit between forces and bodies in the public sphere and, consequently, their effects on private life. With regard to the viral wave of protests, it is important to understand their effects, seek lines of cause and consequence, but also, in addition, to think about how to deal with the new concrete and subjective agencies that are revealed, without allowing the event to become outdated. If, on the one hand, the second half of the 2010s is marked by the rise of a conservative wave, on the other hand, it can be said that this is a very powerful period of boiling and consolidation of ways of insurgency and empowerment of many groups and causes. It seems to be symptomatic in this period, in which the impulse for the construction of new bases and organizations gains so much strength, that there is also a reaction of control of these new empowerments.

The performative manifestation ends up de-automating already established and vitiated places, raising questions and revealing the absurdities of our politics. The notion of aesthetic-political action allows an effective creative action to be carried out by anyone interested in provoking and problematizing life, and not only by those who have some recognition or institutionally call themselves artists. Theorists, teachers, provocateurs and activists: “ALL AND ANY PEOPLE IS ABLE TO MAKE A POLITICAL AESTHETIC ACTION” (Coletivo 28 de Maio, 2017, p. 2). How can citizens, whether being artists or not, express themselves and act



in the midst of the history that goes through them? How to create and interfere directly in the coming present?

Here, the relationship between art and protest touches this creative restlessness of non-appeasement and search for reinvention. In the midst of suffocating conservative oppression, which insists on maintaining an old and outdated power, the examples mentioned, as well as other examples with which they approach, deal with a creative empowerment, capable of self-questioning, production of new forms and reinventioning. Although certain aesthetic-performative actions do not achieve the definitive resolution of a problem, they end up promoting venting moments, inspiring new struggles, helping in the maintenance of strength and enabling other forms of gaze.

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