



interview with  
**Eleonora Fabião**  
Relâche / Casa Hoffmann

**CH:** For many years you worked with the theatre group Centro de Demolição e Construção do Espetáculo of Aderbal Freire-Filho and with Ivana Leblon's Companhia KO Produções. How did the migration from theatre to performance happen?

**EF:** I don't think "migration" is the best word to define what is happening, because I still want to do and think theater a lot, whatever "theater" is, or whatever we want it to be. In fact, I emigrated from Brazil to New York to take my doctorate on Performance Studies and here I became interested on this difficult subject called performance, which is so hard to define. But I think that the KO - scene based on the actor's dramaturgy grounded on intensive energetic and psychophysical training – and of the Centro de Demolição e Construção do Espetáculo – a research about "open dramaturgy," a scene you do with the spectator, highly political theater – already pointed to the performance, even if not directly. One way to show what has happened (and still is being processed), is that my stage has exploded – the scene has expanded, it grew, it became bigger. *Alice*, a solo-spectacle based on Lewis Carroll's writings, which I directed and acted on before I left Brazil, was already a hybrid. At a certain moment during the piece, I - Alice - cat – queen, hat maker – egg asked one spectator 'what he was made of'; after the answer I asked to touch him, and I did. The performance was already there in this action, touch, and specific question.

The fact is, that I found a large and creative space, which includes and transforms the experimental theater that I had been practicing during the nineties. The name of this expansiveness is performance; the name of this performance is expansiveness.

**CH:** What differs *performance art* from *live art*?

**EF:** As I see it, the performance in its multiple forms – "body art", biographical performance, activist performance, etc – is primarily a kind of live art, although it is also possible to perform by absence or virtually. Live art is the one that happens among people that are alive, based on this "technology" of shared presences. But I do not like these titles and definitions very much – this sells many books, gives names to conferences, festivals and such, but it doesn't say much. I prefer to think about what "liveness" [sic] is, about how complicated it is to define what is "live" in art in this time of clone reproduction and of performance on the Internet. I think it is neat to think that what is live generates life, gives life, and that my body is the thermometer to perceive if something is alive and spreading life. I like to approach something and pay deep attention, observe the resonance in and around me. I work with the idea that the performance of subtle but emphatic way informs as well as produces body; the performance is a space for the thought and productions of ideas and bodies.

**CH:** During the workshop at Casa Hoffmann you talked about the terminology of the word “performance” in the contexts of Fordism and Taylorism in the US, meaning its efficiency, efficacy and effectiveness. Can you talk more about the influence of this terminology in performance art?

**EF:** Oh the three e-e-e (laughing). Yes, the damned triad, the perverse little triad... The word “performance” has such a broad meaning and a lack of form that it sometimes makes me dizzy. John McKenzie invented the relation among these terms and the performance in the book *Perform or Else*. Let’s go by parts.

The word comes from the old French – parfournir – meaning “to complete” or “to perform”. In English the word comprises three dimensions: realization, show and performance. What seems interesting to me is that in the English meaning the notions of show and experience get all mixed up.

Out of the Arts, the word is very much used to define the return of a product, the qualities of a given consumer goods; for example, the performance of the new Honda car. The performance of the Honda employee is also measured in terms of efficiency, efficacy and effectiveness. The consumer, on his turn, also fits these values once it participates in the same spirit of profit maximization, time optimization, and quality enjoyment. People and objects share the same unique spirit of productivity, efficacy and efficiency.

Thus, a great paradox is conveyed in the term (word), once the artistic performance in its immediacy, ephemeral nature and extreme corporality keeps in check the serial reproduction, machinery standards and the consumer logic, that is, the effectiveness-efficacy-efficiency. I do not say that it escapes from the economy of consumption, which would be too much, foolish romanticism, something silly – just take a look at the editorial market, the media and documental compulsion around “the most ephemeral of the arts,” the consuming clamor around this slogan. The fact is that performance challenges the idea of production and consuming of artistic works when it does not favor the making of the objects as in the visual arts or show repetition. Of course, what motivates the scenic repetition is the renewal, and each show is really unique, but, even then, it is a flexible type of serialization. Yes, performance has its share of the market, but searching other forms of insertion, another temporality and the occupation of other subjective and objective spaces.

I am interested in this virus, virulence, the bodies, qualities of the movements, the dramaturgies that come from this point of view, a point of view that finds habit, the automatic and the common sense extremely odd. Performance, due to its nature of difficult commercialization and its marginal character (margins: occupies a relative space among the arts – visual, performing, film – and, between art and non-art) many times abject (non articulated bodies, taken to extreme psychophysical conditions, poetic brutality) and socially discrepant (multiple sexual forms, fine and grotesque humor, eccentric and ironic existential and corporeal practices) defines itself as a way of resistance, as arguable force, as political force. Performance generates and presents bodies and situations where the occidental contemporaneous normative – knowingly consumptive, mechanized, logocentric (NT: logo-word, centric-center), racist, homophobic, out of the body – is thought.

Performance, as I think and practice it, refuses the model efficacy-efficiency-effectiveness for, without further appeal, it does not take part in a communication system where the idea of a pre-determined meaning by the artist prevails. I am interested in the shared creation of meaning as the event takes place, as part of this event. The performer suggests a theme and initiates a relational space-time; instead of transmitting a determined message, I value the immediate generation of meaning. It is about relational experiences where subtler forms of communication are at stake.

**CH:** Peggy Phelan advocates the ontological anti-economic aspect of performance emphasizing its non-reproducible quality. Considering the terminological paradox Fordism-Taylorism, how do you perceive the matter of performance and reproducibility, since a lot of information that reaches us about performance art comes from video documentation, photographs and books/articles, in other words, via reproductions?

**EF:** Here begins the tasks of the performance scholar, critic or historian, the sensibility to handle an object of study from its specificities, of seeking the dramaturgy that best reveals it. Performance demands a performing theory action; this is what Peggy Phelan suggests and I agree. The fact is that the experimentalism asks for theory practices and equally experimental criticism.

I remember the saying of a German historian from the 19 century— Ranke states that the objective of history is “to present the fact as it is”. As if there were unequivocal and transparent relation between the writing and factuality, as if historiography was reproductive and not fundamentally representative. The way I see it, the register, the document, the journalistic commentary or the historical study are representations of facts, ways to access the past via modernization and not by reconstitution; dramaturgically, it is possible to show the conscience one has of this maneuver or not.

Therefore, to start with, I do not think that these piles of books, articles, photos and videos are exactly the reproductions of works because I see in fact the performance in its radical instantaneity as something non- productive. I consider all these forms, deviations of the performance, representations derived from fact-performance that can even come to be other pieces with strong performable content as Peggy wants the theoretical text to be. I think that the more the thinker, the video maker, the editor, or the performance photographer shows clearly the representative text and non-reproductive of these registers, or yet, of these derived documental pieces, more critical, discursive, editorial and visual qualities will be achieved.

**CH:** You and André Lepecki establish a dialogue with performance through references to Merleau-Ponty, Gaston Bachelard, Deleuze and Guattari, which seems to be an influence of New York University that in its program approaches performance art and philosophy. Can you talk about how these philosophical references have influenced American and European performance?

**EF:** I do not know how to answer that, but I believe André would be the person to ask. He is one of the Performance Studies professors who is more interested in the performance-philosophy relation. I can speak about the influence of philosophy in my job as a performer, of the influence of theory in my practical work. In fact, I already started phrasing in an awkward form, once I do not differentiate much between one thing and another. I am used to saying that my PhD has been the performance of the longest duration that I have undertaken and whenever I am writing I face the text as an element that could be part of the next piece. Few things give me more ideas for performances, more inspiration, than a good theoretical text, than a text of Merleau-Ponty or of Wittgenstein. As I feel, the thought reflects back immediately in the body, it goes through like an electrical feeding – many times while I read I need to dance to see if I have really absorbed it – I do not say “I understood” but I say “I absorbed” what was being read. “ Birds of a feather flock together” [NT: Dito popular – Cada um com o seu cada qual].

**CH:** In the article *What is Performance*, from 2000, you state: “You do a good or bad performance if you accept or not accept the action as a transformative experience”. What do you mean by “transformative” and what is the spectators` role in this transformation?

**EF:** This sentence is somehow biblical! (laughing). By transformation, I mean transitory form, “transform”, action as a sequence, or simultaneous sequences, of forms, interactions, set of unstable relations. That one seems biblical and this one seems to come from a bio- chemistry cellular book! (laughing even more).

Few days ago I wrote about the performer-spectator relation in an article called “scenic body, scenic state.” I said that the performer activity is not autonomous but relative; the performer is relative to the spectator by reciprocity and by completion, I think the spectator is such a central element in the piece as the performer because he has fundamental functions also – the spectator is the most variable of equation-performance, the big referential to perform the program, the element who makes it happen. The performer is the “starter”, the creator and the channel. Each one doing his/her own work. (NT: The cobbler must stick to his last), which are complementary and reciprocal functions. The action of

the spectator of the performance is so central that the word seems not to be related to the fact – even the word “witness” seems insufficient. When the person is asked to occupy and build that moment, when his/her action becomes indispensable, and his/her presence happens, he is a collaborator, a co-creator of the event.

Of course it is necessary to think in scale – there are almost invisible collaborations, subtle transformations, minimum movements, imperceptible reverberations, processes that extend in long duration or, on the other hand, abrupt ruptures, cracklings, paradigm changes – and all the tones between these two extremes.

What I find the most interesting is that the contact among people is potentially transforming, that to pay attention to the other is very powerful – and I think it is very good to invest in it.

**CH:** Performances that affirm themselves through self-mutilation and beyond the physical limits like the works of Orlan, Stelarc, Chris Burden and Rudolph Schvartzkogl put on the table issues such as the hybrid body, the reconstructed body, the suicidal body, (“the body without organs?”)... It seems that the dialogue with pain is very current in performance... How do you perceive this dialogue?

**EF:** In a book called *The Body in Pain* the author, Elaine Scarry, points to two immediate reactions before the body in pain: the visionary refuses to see the scene instinctively, looks down, turns the face and in extreme cases, he faints; and, also, becomes dyslexic, loses the speech; that is, the two most immediate forms of access to the world and to the other – sight and speech – are destabilized, interrupted, perturbed. These routine actions of conduct and perception could be disarticulated only through a shock. The sight of pain, the fragility of the human body produces an electrical discharge, something the performer is seeking. Their working material is exactly the cultural rejection to pain. In Western society, pain is something that cannot be felt – without the desire not to feel it. It cannot be seen without being rejected. This stirs up the viscera thoroughly. Acting against the will, acting in discomfort, some contents could emerge and be evaluated.

I think there is also a need for cleansing. Performance was consolidated as a genre after the Second World War, after the Hiroshima explosion. This experience of disintegration, of breaking apart, pulverization and massive dismemberment, of idiocy and massive violence, needed to be either digested or vomited. Significantly the performance of the sixties and seventies addresses this experience.

Just to complete, I wanted to say that the “spectator” when watching the performance projects the feeling of a determined type of pain; he/she can only identify himself/herself with the type of pain that he/she knows, the pain of an accident, for example, which is very different from what the performer is experiencing.

Adrenalin is a magic anesthetic. The person is crossing mental and somatic limits; it is in an altered state of conscience thanks to full engagement in the program he/she decided to fulfill, in a way that his/her body has another endurance for pain. Ulay and Abramovic comment that the work is not about pain but about decision and determination – if the spectator feels nauseated, they feel courage. The overcoming of limits brings feelings of freedom and satisfaction that are incredibly strengthening.

I don't mean to diminish the doings at all; I am only taking away the pathology of these actions as much as possible, because these actions are radically conscious and studied, taking away the fetish of the masochist character of the projects that, at the end, in the majority of cases, have more to do with the relation courage/fear than with a pleasure/suffering relation.

Nowadays, I do not hear much on performances that work with pain; I hear more about people interested in overcoming resistances, extend psychophysical limits. Of course, these extensions are painful but maybe they do not bleed. In the nineties and the two thousands there is a certain irony with this type of dramaturgy. Last year I saw a performance of Guillermo Gómez-Peña where he pretended to iron his face and it was tragicomic.

**CH:** “Ouvir a loucura estética” (“To Listen to aesthetic craziness”) was one of the indications in the workshop. References are not a trouble: from Artaud to all the superscripted performers, this issue

was and is there, totally present. But what could be said about the artistic responsibility of the performer in this frontier?

**EF:** I think I did not say this sentence, I do not see it fitting my mouth, but this is the way you heard me and it is what counts.

Well, answering your question: They are the “proportions of prudence” recommended by Deleuze and Guattari in the [How Do You Make Yourself a Body Without Organs?. \[ 1 \]](#) Without such proportions the experience undoes because there will not be an “after the experience”. The prudence is a necessary tension. Without prudence there is no paradox because everything turns into a nonsense uproar, and, without paradox, there is no performance.

**CH:** Many performers seem to refer in their works to a transcendental experience (Abramovic, Beuys, Cohen, etc). On the other hand, there is another aspect in performance that lies on its emblematic conceptual characteristic. How does this information, both non-contradictory and paradoxical, prompt a dialogue with you?

**EF:** That is what I think, I am a human type of being, and I was born with a sensitive conscience, or, in other words, with a thinking body. The body is this unique phenomenon: it is solid, thick, gaseous, electric and liquid. It happens, yes, because the body is one happening, the body happens in changing densities. We are vibrating uninterruptedly, a minimum vibration that reveals the non-stopping changes organically processed as the negotiations of internal and external references. We are in a state of permanent friction with the world and we are the world. We are gifted with multiple capabilities - sensorial, intellectual, physical, psychic, emotional, spiritual, sexual, extra-sensorial, energetic and all the others I do not know and the ones I forgot that I know – that are dynamic intertwined in braid of visibilities and invisibilities, materiality and immateriality, flux and quietness. As Espinosa says, we are affected and we affect, we define ourselves by our capabilities of affection. I think performance dedicates itself to thinking this extraordinary “thing” that is to be and to have a body, a body and a context where the body happens, a body in a production circuit of determined types of bodies. The body is transcendental experience and conceptual experience and I do not see why one should give privilege to any of the capabilities in detriment of another if they exist exactly by reciprocity.

It is the same we just finished saying about the “spectator” and the performer existing by reciprocity and by complement.

**CH:** Regarding the [connective tissue \[ 1 \]](#), of which Merleau-Ponty talks about... Are there any groups working with performance through this perspective? We know that in 2003 the Hemispheric Institute meeting in NY was focused on art and religion, and maybe this can mean a relation, but out of (if that is possible) the mystical field experience. Are there groups working from this information?

**EF:** The work I see better exploring the idea of connective fabric is the series of “relational objects” and the relational actions of Lygia Clark; but here we are talking about ghostly forms of the body and not of mystic experiences. I do not know if Lygia Clark has read Merleau-Ponty. I am just starting my research about her work, I cannot confirm or suppose anything yet. Phenomenology was the currency at that moment in time. She was very well informed and extremely intelligent.

**CH:** “Turbinar a inteligência das potências” (“Turbinating the intelligence of the potencies”), was an issue raised during the workshop. Can you talk more about that, associating this subject with your performance *Giro Piece*, which was presented during the third meeting of the Hemispheric Institute, in Peru?

**EF:** I really like this verb – to turbinate – but I do not think I said this sentence. Sorry for being so refined towards the sentences that you mentioned from the workshop, but the thing is, to work the language is fundamental, to make efforts to say what one wants to say with clearness and exactness,

is very important. So “to turbinate” reminds me of how homeopathic medicine is made, where through spinning, the pharmacist activates this or that component making the effects very potential.

From Bachelard on, André and I have talked about “turbining metaphors”. Instead of keeping them well settled, literally settled by spoken or written language, I suggest, as other people do, to experience them in their bodies. And here the example of *Giro* illustrates well what I want to say. After the World Trade Center fell, an episode I saw very closely, each time I entered my office to try something, I felt dizzy, trying to concentrate on my ideas, trying to do this and that. All I really new was how lost I was. I was lost, without direction, dizzy, trying to stay on my feet. Then I started to spin around, spinning longer each time, spinning very differently from the classical ballet dancer who fixes a point in space or the derviche monk who fixes his eyes on the hands. I used to look outside, always straight ahead, to a place that does not exist because the spinning is exactly a dismantling of the special referential. For me, that was it. I hurt a little in the beginning but after a certain time I developed relations of compensation between the vertical and horizontal lines in a movement that I understood to be a long walk on the same spot. I brought my own bewilderment metaphor to exhaustion. I went down to the last consequences. “I turbined”.

I made two versions of this piece to barefeet. [The street version happened in Largo da Carioca \(Rio\)](#) next to a high and abstract sculpture of José Resende with the collaboration of a noisy knife sharpener; the indoor version happened in a gallery in Lima (Peru), where I span under one of the house door jambs among a hip of black, brown, orange and blue wires which conducted the electricity through a very noisy power generator functioning outside the gallery to a number of televisions which were showing 4 videos made for the event.

**CH:** The importance of the performer’s presence always seems to be a big issue. In the workshop it was said that: “A atenção acaba com as hierarquias do nosso corpo. Tudo se torna uma potência só.” (“Attention erases the hierarchies of our body. Everything becomes one potency.”) How are presence and attention related?

**EF:** This question is big. I will try to be concise.

The quality of the performer’s presence is associated with his/her capability to inhabit the present of the present, the realtime of attention.

Attention is a form of sensorial and perceptive connection, a pass of psychophysical expansion without dispersion, a form of knowledge.

It concerns a sprained state of alert, a relaxed tension that can be experienced when he or she is paying attention to his/her own being, to the other and to the environment.

Attention allows for the maximum and minimum quantities that usually escape in daily chores, to be penetrated and explored.

Attention deepens (vertically) and amplifies (horizontally) the relations, the bodies, and the “body of the relation”.

The “body of the relation” is a field of shared strength that I understand as “presence”.

The presence happens among attentive bodies and not in bodies.

**CH:** It seems that the Yugoslavian performer Marina Abramovic is a very important reference for you. What about the other strong influences in your practical and theoretical work?

**EF:** Yes, Abramovic and Ulay. Yoshi Oida, the Japanese actor established in Paris, also is a very strong reference for me. Pina Bausch is an incredible special artist. Juliana Carneiro da Cunha, Clark, Aderbal and Ivana, too. I recently came to know the work of Matthew Barney and became greatly impressed. I like to work with André Lepecki and I also like his work very much. Peggy Phelan is a very important reference. Ronaldo Brito, a master. And, without any doubt, Merleau-Ponty, Deleuze+Guattari and Wilhelm Reich are very important.

**CH:** About Lygia Clark... What are the relations between her work and performance?

**EF:** Lygia Clark did a very good and interesting transition from her work as a visual artist to a therapeutic work. The object goes through several transformations, from bi-dimensional and highly visual, the surface adhered to the wall, to the tri-dimensional tactile, handled by the spectator, “animal” loose on the floor. Later she creates clothes, masks and facilities for sensorial experiences extensively mobilizing and involving. Then, there are the propositions for individual and in-group actions, which allow for work with patients known as “structure of the self” where Clark applies the “relational objects” in the body of her clients. The use of worthless material is determinant, but powerful sensorial stimulators such as plastic bags, elastic, stones, newspapers, panty-hose, water, seeds, shells, sand, foam balls, onion bags for example. Then we have a triple metamorphose happening: of the own “artist” in her values and needs, of the “artistic object” in her attributes and functions, of the “spectator” who goes through the roles of accomplice, collaborator and agent. The relations of this life project with the performance are numberless. I am not saying that Clark “performed” – her son, Alvaro Clark, tells us she did not like the word, and that she referred to the works with a more performing character as “propositions” – but the central importance that the body starts to have in the work, the radical inclusion of the spectator, as well as the absolute freedom of means and materials allows you to think about performance in a very rich manner. Clark is a higher referential because she really forces the limits of art, she opens and fills the hybrid spaces that cannot be classified, takes out the myth figure of the artist and the material value of the object. She works to develop the perceptive and creative capabilities of the people, in order to awake their bodies and to expand their conscience, that is; to increase the quality of life through highly poetic and strongly relational actions.

**CH:** What do the series *Convergências* (*Convergences*) and *Operações* (*Operations*), developed by André Lepecki and you consist in?

**EF:** These are two projects that ended up having unexpected derivation. I still do not know exactly how to talk about them. The thing is that André and I have thought together and performed works in partnership, as was the case of this workshop in Curitiba and other interventions. These collaborations, in a way can be considered as part of the series “convergences”. But what was previously dreamt about has not been performed yet. It is still on the paper.

**CH:** What about your current projects and artistic perspectives coming back to Brazil?

**EF:** At this very moment I am writing my doctorate thesis obstinately. I am going to Berlin in June to research and present a series called *Peças Acumuladas* (*Accumulated Pieces*). I return to Brazil on the second semester to continue teaching at UFRJ. I am a professor at the Department of Theater Direction, and, from then on, put into practice many performance projects that are being thought in New York to be performed in Brazil. I love Rio streets. I also hope to know more about what is happening in terms of performance throughout the country and write about this movement, which as I perceive is spreading more and more. To start with, that is it.

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In the 1990's she worked in several plays as a member of two theater groups: *Centro de Demolição e Construção do Espetáculo* (direction by Aderbal Freire-Filho) and KO Produções (direction by Ivana Leblon). In 2000 she did

*Alice*, her first solo piece, performed and directed by herself, in collaboration with the musician Hermeto Pascoal and Waltércio Caldas. Since 2001 she has dedicated her time to the research and creation of performances. She currently develops two new series in partnership with André Lepecki: *Convergências* (*Convergences*) and *Operações* (*Operations*).

[ 1 ] **A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia**, by Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari.

[ 2 ] **The Visible and the Invisible**, by Maurice Merleau-Ponty.

