

The struggle to belong

Dealing with diversity in 21st century urban settings.

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The Drama of Contamination

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This article studies the interrelation between the contemporary phenomenon of contamination and artistic practices that still strive to be an act of truth. Two recorded dramatic enactments have motivated my theoretical imagination. They are pieces of video art that constitutes an art-research project entitled *Transviados*, by Brazilian visual artist João Bosco Millen. In my speculation, art is conceived as an act of truth that enhances the experience of life, while the state of contamination, the condition that best describes our existential modality. Thus, my contribution for the debate over the topic “The Struggle to Belong”, heading this year’s conference, comprise of reflections about the ontology of art in an age of contamination. I aim to incite the formulation of a “hermeneutics”¹ based on the impure, instead of on the old metaphysics of essence.

The enactments of transvestite actor Carol Fox, orchestrated by visual artist João Bosco Millen, are part of a series among a body of work, composed of paintings for the most part. I believe they should be viewed as performances of a painter, who deliberately disregards the orthodox painting format. More precisely, they function as “painted scenes” that take place in the “outside” world of circumstances, overseeing thus the framed, protected and artificial space of the *quadrature*.

Sometimes, works like these can be misunderstood with the many efforts that aim at voicing injustices. As phenomenal entities, artworks inevitably unveil issues that are contemporary to them, but they also have their own intrinsic logics, one that is not indifferent to, but it is independent of, sociological problems. In order to allow for no misconception, I should make clear that the underlying argument of Millen’s poetics is the phenomenon of contamination and the diversity that it entails, not really the exclusion of transvestites.

Millen’s work reveals the idea of art as *truth in the act*. I am aware that this assertion can be interpreted as if some sort of metaphysical truth is contained in art, though absent in reality. To the contemporary imagination, metaphysical truths sound like the reemergence of the notion of creative genius, that both modernists and postmodernists

¹ I use the term hermeneutics here in the lack of a better one. The fact that hermeneutics implies a rational interpretation that leads to knowledge stands as a setback for the concept of contamination that I am trying to develop.

have dispensed – the latter, in support of their general distrust in any authority, the former, in the name of equality, as required by enlightened humanism. Along this study, I hope to demonstrate that none of these two views in fact prevail in a world of widespread contamination like ours. Moreover, because truth represented the grandest of the grand narratives, it was in such a way targeted by the deconstructive theories of post-structural thought, that the very word “truth” is entangled in a number of stigmatizing precepts.

To state that the condition of contamination is the best definition for our ontology does not presuppose the denial of truth, neither as metaphysics, as modernism and postmodernism do, nor as physics, as the old metaphysical tradition did. In fact, the concept of contamination, that I am trying to construe, rejects this stale dualism. It is based on a shift in the geography of reasoning (*cambiar la geografía del razonamiento*²), that aims to recover silenced and neglected traditions of knowledge. Traditions that believe, for example, that written language is basically anxiety for eternity, a denial of the transient character of life – arrogance, as the Greek tragic flaw. Or, that scholarship culture is not much more than an efficient way of exercising power over others.

The current visibility of so many heterogeneous groups has led to the following historical dilemma: should we confine ourselves to the boundaries of western epistemology, restricting Truth to a realist definition, that is, to ethics? (This in itself would constitute in a huge progress in face of the barbarities of politics.) Or, should we broaden our concept of truth and repudiate all “waste of human experience”, caused by the repetitive destruction of the Other? By facing the moral challenges that each different culture/group presents, we may, eventually, learn how to live as *différence*. The preservation of the “opponent” emerges as the underlying logics of a new and less violent form of communication; one that does not aspire to arrive at any specific truth. The nihilism that we are encircled makes this shift imperative. Only from the outskirts of western thought can a new language arise to overcome the dead end produced by postmodern nihilism.³

² W. Mignolo, *El Vuelco de la Razón*. Unpublished manuscript.

³ By this I mean the current situation of philosophy and politics in which no postulate is trusted and no new idea/proposal in fact appear from the confining encirclement of continental philosophy.

Truth has been devalued by postmodernism's belief that everything is fictional, meaning, culturally determined. Cynicism – feigned seriousness – was suggested, and unfortunately adopted, as the proper mental attitude to deal with a “fictitious” world. Tautologies aside, if everything is fictional, then this very “postulate” (that everything is fictional) should also be regarded as fictional, and discredited. In case we maintain the postmodern belief, should all discussion be halted, and the full control and engineering of life on Earth surrendered to (seemingly) better articulated forces (capitalism, liberalism, fundamentalism, etc)?

When authors like Walter Mignolo, for example, claims for “epistemological disobedience”, he is targeting the notions of truth inherited from Latin-Germanic epistemologies from Plato to Heidegger. He is in fact accusing them not only of having driven us to the current ecological and sociological *cul de sac*, but also of being incapable of driving us out of it. In his view, epistemologies based on the notion of truth as One should be refused, because their singularized “monophony” is not only unreal, but also the foundation for a rhetoric of domination. The (apparent) alternative, Nietzsche's eulogy of heroic power, escapes not, as well, the infatuation of the One.⁴ Modernist philosophies of presence, such as existentialism and phenomenology, that have aimed to weak the One mythology, prepared the ground for a more effective interference of philosophy in economic and political models, but they too acknowledged that the West was ensnared by its own language game.

The transition from a metaphysics of purity, based on the One ideology, to a condition of contamination, founded on real diversity, is made manifest by several factors, among them the end of colonialism, that overlapped with the process of globalization, the death of nature⁵, that, above all, made us reconsider the feasibility of man's life on Earth, and postmodernism's skepticism towards metanarratives. In my view, works such as the series by Millen, while proposing another language game, make visible the destruction

⁴ Or, Nietzsche's desperate extremism, as Gadamer describes it in **Verdade e Método**: traços fundamentais de uma hermenêutica filosófica. Petrópolis: Ed. Vozes, 2008. p. 182.

⁵ “Nature exists no more”, says Clov in Samuel Beckett's **EndGame** (1958), in a metaphor to the failure of all models.

of old convictions based on the monophony of purism: metaphysics of essence, searches for identity, nationalisms, the notion of nation-state and nietzschean heroism.

Millen's work makes contamination visible, because it springs up directly from a contaminated environment, both in the themes it embraces and in the geographical position from where the artist thinks and works. The world of transvestites with its bright colors, excessive prints, cosmetics and fake bijoux, wigs and mannerisms regards purity with scorn. Their affected sexual demeanor also denounces the repressive forces of social etiquette, decorum and "good taste". Purity and Puritanism are despised, along with the notion of interiority that goes with them. In the world of transvestites, being emerges from the outside world.⁶

The impure, understood as an existential condition, is the motivation of his art-research project, and as the epitome of exteriority, explains the connection of the *Transviados*' series with the urban "ecology". This can be particularly meaningful in a country like Brazil, where anthropologists and historians, from Gilberto Freyre to Roberto da Matta, have already demonstrated how crucial can be the antagonism between the street and the home (exterior x interior) to the sociability of Brazilians. Since its formation, cities in Brazil were strongly dichotomic. The streets represented an environment contaminated by the excluded ones: slaves, small street vendors, bandits and petty thieves, prostitutes and the homeless. In contrast, there stood the artificially protected domestic life. Architecture played an important part in designing homes like private "citadels". However, in spite of their defensive walls, they were daily "maculated" by the presence of slaves living within their premises and working for their functioning and maintenance.

Nuanced by history, this social idiosyncrasy has remained until today in Brazilian urban centers, and comes afore in this art project. Some features, like the above mentioned dichotomy, are symptomatic in the *Transviados*' series, as the prefix trans indicates. The prefix trans has been widely used to dissent from the linearity and the modern idea of progress denoted by the term "postmodernity". Practices of segregation, based on racial differences, like the one above cited, do not the typical enlightened model of

⁶ This is a tentative usage of the concept, for the notion of Being necessarily implies the idea of One.

modernity, founded on a linear progress of humanity, achieved through the development of science. Much in the same way, Western colonization never followed this model. As a consequence, the process of laicization, the democratization of knowledge and the implementation, in a global scale, of universal rationalism were pursued only by cost of oppression over all other forms of thought, life and cosmogony. The term transmodernity thus denotes that in these “fringe” regions the precepts of modernity were never applied in order to implement emancipation, but to demean, for the purpose of exploitation, the peoples who were being colonized.

The cultural diversity found today in such regions, in part, can be attributed to the unequal application of those precepts. Since rationalism represented oppression and domination, any movement against it stood for political resistance. At the end, by resisting universal rationalism and capitalism, its close partner, the excluded population (which added up for the largest part) unknowingly fought the homogenization that today dominates at large the world. The multicultural situation that prevailed in these regions also raised difficulties to the assimilation of a type of rationality as provincial as universalism, to use Mignolo’s pun. After all, he argues, a modality of reason that arrogantly wishes to suppress all others is, to say the least, parochial. Without diving into the (easy) nihilism and cynicism of postmodernity,⁷ the *Transviados* has been challenging the ideology of a homogenizing mentality and testing modernism’s level of tolerance to impurity.

Transvestites’ lavish demeanor and extravagant ensemble defy the social underpinnings of purism. The most conspicuous of these being the role played by women, or expected to be played by them. The parody of transvestism is in itself the reverse of essential purity, for which the womb – out of where life springs up – is the primary representation.⁸ The videos that compose the *Transviados*’ series are evidences of our embarrassment brought by diversity’s moral implications and complications. The strong presence of modern architecture in Rio de Janeiro, where the scenes were filmed,

⁷ Transviado is a game of words. Literally, it means “off the right path”. The word was used to describe the young Brazilian generation of the 1960’s. In this art project it gains a witty connotation, for *Viado*, in Brazilian Portuguese, stands for faggot, a politically incorrect form of treatment.

⁸ The purity of the womb is analogous to the idea of a *nihilo* from where being emerges; a common concept in cosmogonies that are founded in the notion of life as the negation of nothingness.

magnifies the reactions to the performances, making the situations look almost burlesque.

Obstruction to the filming of Carol Fox (the actor) in the Museum's surroundings, by its staff, followed by the suspicious attitude of the gallery's receptionist, in "chic" Ipanema, brings to light the unresolved theme of difference. The camera crudely and cruelly inverts the power relations, like in the famous street interviews with passersby made by tropicalist filmmaker Glauber Rocha. While the enactment in the Museum confronts its vanguard position, represented by a fancy and monumental architecture, the one in Ipanema, scorns the purity symbolized by the modern white cube. The latter also raises doubts about the image of freedom and vanguardism that the neighborhood holds and, ultimately, tackles the current lack of autonomy in the arts. Both dramatic shots convert cutting edge exhibition spaces into monumental stelai. The recorded reactions also highlight the stratified geography of Rio, divided into a poor and suburban north and a rich and urbanized south.

The aesthetic *potentia* of these short films are due in part to its polluted background: tiger prints, mixed marble floors and cheap bar *decór* convene with the transvestites' repetitive plea: "buy my work", "buy my work". A plea that bounds back at certain art works when trying to enter the art market, sometimes as perverse and perverted as that of prostitution.

The trans prefix helps elucidate a new geography in which border thinking is located, as well as the in-betweenness of urban and rural. Earlier, I cited Samuel Beckett's statement "nature is dead", in the hope that it could enlighten a core issue of this discussion: a deceased nature is a frontal attack to the culture of Metaphysics, for whom nature is the ideal creation of a demiurgic act, and therefore *the* model for man's deeds. The traditional notion of representation as mimesis, in western art, is based upon this presupposition or, rather, upon this belief. This is precisely why to represent is never simply a copy; but an act of truth, since it conveys the *Idea* of the object represented.

Furthermore, Beckett's characters dissent from the conventional notion of personality, sprung from the concept of individual invented by the Greeks, in order to distinguish the heroic temperament.⁹ The protagonism of these non heroes in Beckett's plays and novels relegates to secondary roles the historically constructed notion of (strong) personality, heavily dependant on the scaffolding of the One ideology. Moreover, the scarce population of his plays is constituted of these typical inhabitants of modern urban centers, where their presence is unwanted. These are, thus, existences based on the very notion of exclusion – certainly, an experience underwent by an Irishman like Beckett.¹⁰

No doubt transvestites play, in a spectacle-like manner, characters of fractured identity. So, the very idea of authorship, present in the concept of demiurge and genius, could never fit their world. When I came in contact with Millen's series, I soon realized that sex was less the issue of transvestism, than was the assertion of a split identity. To be a transvestite is not, as a certain dictionary defines: "to seek sexual pleasure from wearing clothes that are normally associated with the opposite sex". Gender is our most obvious feature, consequently, the main target when the reign of identity is questioned.

Fractured is also the way they occupy the city. In general, transvestites do not go to shopping centers, to cite just one example, because they offer no easy exit, in case they are chased. They also avoid going out "dressed" during the day to circumvent reprisals; at night, in the "custody" of their specific social role, they circulate within limited borders. These examples of social violence prove the overnarrowness of our concept of citizenship, entirely dependent on identity.

Considering the traditional bond between modernity and subjectivity, individuals of fractured identities fall out of the bucket of modernity. Postmodernists tried to "include" them in their own mythology,¹¹ but transvestism predates postmodernism, so we can only think of it as:

⁹ The title **The Unnamable**, of Beckett's novel of 1947-50, epitomizes the rejection to idea of a strong individual/personality represented in the Greek culture by the warrior – the only one who actually had a name to singularize him. The notion of individual, and, in modern terms, of personality, is connect to the notion of men whose strength (physical and psychological) is above average and for this reason deserve to have a title, a name that identified only himself.

¹⁰ See Edward Said for a discussion of British imperialism in Ireland. **Culture and Imperialism**, London: Vintage Random House, 1994.

The literature of Roberto Arlt in Argentina is also notorious for these non heroes found in the streets.

¹¹ Specially Foucault's concept of subaltern knowledges.

“other narratives of the self and community that do not look to the state/citizen bind as the ultimate construction of sociality...these other constructions of self and community ...will never enjoy the privilege of providing the metarratives or teleologies (...) of our histories. This is partly because these narratives often themselves bespeak an antihistorical consciousness, that is they entail subject positions and configurations of memory that challenge and undermine the subject that speaks in the name of history.”¹²

Subtle meanings can be drawn from Beckett’s predication; the scientific scrutiny of nature is one of them. “*Expérimentation totale*” is how the philosopher Jacques Poulain has named science’s endless scrutiny of nature. Its method is closely connected (analogous actually) to the operation of mapping (epitomized nowadays by the Google technology), so crucial to all exploitative imperialist enterprises.

The total exploration/experimentation/mapping of nature by science led to the impression that nature as a natural phenomenon is dead. Beckett’s synthesis (“nature exists no more”¹³) can be seen as pointing to the illusion of total control underlying the Cartesian solipsism that grounds the modern scientific method. For modern science, compliance with such mapping methodology is *the* precondition for being. In other words, beings only gain existence after scientific scrutiny. Paradoxically as this may sound, their actual presence in reality is no proof of existence. It is this inference, precisely, that entitles science to propose, “replacing” thus a God who creates by naming. As such, through science, everything becomes a proposition of man, nature included. Ralph Waldo Emerson, inverting this hubristic paradigm, wrote: “everything is *natura naturans*” (including man).

¹² Dipesh Chakrabarty, **Provincializing Europe: Postcolonial Thought and Historical Difference**, Princeton University Press, 2007, p.37.

¹³ Free translation. The sentence comes about in a conversation between Clov and Hamm. **Fim da Partida** (Endgame), São Paulo: Cosac Naify, 2005, p. 51-52

The *Transviados*’ series is the unfolding of a project based on urban “tribes”. If art “is a formal agent, destined to the concrete, poetic and political apprehension of space”¹⁴, so the relevance of this series, conducted by João Bosco Millen (and of art in general), is to nurture the type of critical judgment that, according to Habermas, was lost along with the privatization of the public sphere.¹⁵ Art as a poetic and political apprehension of space should be understood under the aegis of the Greek word *kritikos* (“being able to discern”).

Habermas “Inquiry” shows that the abasement of the republic of letters, consequential to its submission to the market, has deeply damaged the exercise of rational criticism, leading, eventually, to the “privatization of the public sphere” – in other words: the dissolution of the political into business. The same seems to apply to the visual arts. In advanced capitalism, privatization stands for the transformation of all that is into business, including art.

The question one is impelled to ask is how to rebuild a locus for critical debate from within a culture of commodification, where “mapping” technologies (such as statistics, for instance) are masterfully used in order to maintain the current degradation of all that is (culture, environment, our bodies, food)? Could “fringe regions”, never perfectly accommodated to the omnipresence of capitalism, nor to its pretense universal rationalism, offer a way out? Or marginal groups, who had never fit any of the socially prescribed roles and apparently have developed alternative language games? Can we hope for something in these lines from the arts? It has proved naïve to expect so much from art, especially because what makes the culture of commodification ubiquitous is its universal “drive”, in other words, its ability to homogenize ideas, movements and rationalities, even if they are in frontal opposition to it (such as “border thinking”,¹⁶ for example).¹⁷

¹⁴ Ronaldo Brito, *Espaço em Ato* in: **Richard Serra**, exhibition catalog. Rio de Janeiro: Centro de arte Hélio Oiticica, 1998.

¹⁵ **The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere**: An Inquiry into a Category of Bourgeois Society. The MIT Press, 1991.

¹⁶ The term is used widely in decolonial/postcolonial studies.

¹⁷ As Adorno and Horkheimer have demonstrated in *O Iluminismo como Mistificação das Massas*, the ubiquitousness of the culture of commodification is a consequence of its illuminist basis; Illuminism, as we know, is founded on the universalism of reason.

Notwithstanding, art seems to be the only deed of man still capable of promoting discernment, exactly because it fosters a “poetic and political apprehension of space”. Discernment is neither a source of pleasure, nor an enhancement of life; it just “informs” us when and if life is being enhanced, by art for example. Lack of discernment, on the other hand, leads to a kind of recreative euphoria, a sort of enchantment even, derived of media hype, of images mainly (TV, photograph, movies) of someone else’s pleasure, most often, the media star – a type of pervasion that verges on promiscuity.¹⁸

Contrary to the alienation, promoted by these “relaxation” and recreational activities of the cultural industry, art makes us present by inciting spatial awareness. To be aware of space, i.e. to apprehend it critically, is to be present in mind and body. And to be present is to be “contaminated” by all other forms that share space with us. All forms in space give form *to* space, for the best and for the worst. How we deal with the perception of forms in space is our business, not art’s. When postmodernists claim that there is no formal *potentia* in art, because any authority is but a cultural fiction, I conclude two things. One, they suffer from some ophthalmologic frailty, or/and expect art to change the world. Art can not, but man can, and does it all the time; most often for the worst. That’s why art and artistic thinking are so crucial for city planners.

Art is in opposition to the fantasy land of entertainment and its allurement of escape to a world of uncontaminated purity and ideality. The phenomenological placement (presentness), that only art seems to be able to make happen, promotes situations of discernment. Art is, therefore, truth in the act.

The truth of art is not theoretical, so departs not from an *a priori* idea, but from phenomenological experiences. The truth that art unveils is ontological, so what we perceive, in the experience of art, is our historicity. If Heidegger is correct in affirming that the “nature” of beings is time, then, it is likely to be this that we encounter during the experience of art. Therefore, all art is realist, historic and forever actual. Contrariwise to most objects that loses pertinence with the passing of time and become

¹⁸ Jacques Poulain in a seminar at Universidade Federal Fluminense introduced to me this idea of a pleasure that derives from seeing someone else’s pleasure, so typical of the entertainment industry. I pushed it forward, describing it as promiscuous.

antiquity. Therefore, art is able to reveal aspects of “the human condition” in varied historical periods. The self-evidence of Art’s formal potency is its own answer to postmodernism’s distrust in the authority of Form. The wonderful paintings that populate this city and country are a proof of this.

As far as art and truth are considered, denial of diversity is denial of truth, since reality is diverse in itself. A different problem is the degeneration of reality in a fetish-like wish to comply with an idealist world; a wish that justified any cruelty as long as the ideology of rationalism succeeded. Art can help recover a critical locus that may not be, necessarily, rational, as in Habermas’s “rational critical debate”; neither founded on the idea of One, as debates are, but rather on simple *discernment*. Art is a proof, in fact, that we are not hostages of communication by sound.¹⁹ As we free up Habermas’ sentence from its denotative foundation (rational, debate), then we can relocate communication to a new arena, where art again could play a significant role in halting the waste of human experience and in defining a “hermeneutics” based on the impure rather than on a mythology of purity.

¹⁹ Also a statement by Jacques Poulain at a seminar at the Universidade Federal Fluminense, Brazil, in 2009.

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