

Diffraction Histories of Performance: Participatory practices in the historicization of political performance art

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This article aims at exploring the potential of the gaps in the historicization and archiving of performance artworks created during the Portuguese dictatorship (1933–74) and subsequent revolutionary periods. Framed by their disappearance in periods leading to the 1990s, this art genre has been characterized as dormant, lacking inscription (for example, Madeira 2007, 2012, 2016, 2017; Madeira *et al.* 2018), or absent from art history (for example, Madeira 2007, 2016, 2017). But how can we recover the performative potential of those works? How can we work with, through, within the gaps of historiographic discourse to reclaim the transformative potential of these absences?

Thinking through the negative spaces that aspects of these works occupy, this paper will bring to the fore alternative ways to understand the practices of remembering performance art, mostly through practices of diffraction (Haraway 1988; Barad 2007) and participation. Drawing on feminist frameworks (Haraway 1988; Barad 2007), the reconstruction of this historical milieu will work on stages of appearance and disappearance in relation to ideas of absence and the performative archive. This idea will be explored through the works Música Negativa, or Negative Music, created by E. M. Melo e Castro in 1965, and Identificación, created by Manoel Barbosa in 1975 in relation to the artistic project REACTING TO TIME: The Portuguese in performance (2015–ongoing), led by the choreographer Vânia Rovisco. Negative Music will serve as a starting point to articulate some aspects of performance art disappearance and reappearance. Theories underlying ideas of inclusion and exclusion, as well as practices of diffraction, will be explored in light of agential realism, a framework rehearsed by the scholar Karen Barad (2007). The analysis of the intra-activity of the artwork Identificación and artistic project REACTING TO TIME: The Portuguese in performance (2015–ongoing) will allow us to explore some of the ways that absences and presences might co-constitute each other through processes of active entanglement. Diffraction will then be examined in its

potential of generating political engagement between humans, technology and nature, and the gaps within the historiographic fabric.

Negative spaces: Negative Music by E. M. de Melo e Castro

The first Portuguese happening took place in January that year at Galeria Divulgação, in 1965. Exploring the limits of the spoken word, musical creativity, and embodiment, a group of artists grounded in experimental music and poetry (Metello 2007) produced and performed in this ground-breaking event. A public discussion held between the artist and composer Jorge Peixinho and the art critic Manuel de Lima at the Jornal de Letras e Artes newspaper brought details of this event to light, while the first-hand testimony of the artist Ernesto de Melo e Castro in his book In-Novar, published in April 1977, consolidated this happening in cultural history. Recurrences of this event took other forms when, in 1977, Melo e Castro asked the artist Ana Hatherly to record the performance of the work he first presented at Galeria Divulgação back in 1965—Música Negativa (or Negative Music).^{[note]1}

Negative Music consists of a set of actions performed by the artist on three clappers according to a score (fig. 1). The performance starts with the three clappers resting on a pedestal (fig. 2). Following a pre-established timing, the artist proceeds to strike in the air, shake or strike while still the three clappers resting on the pedestal. Those clappers were, however, modified so they did not clap while being moved or shaken. The stick used to strike the clapper is also imaginary, which implies that the prominent deep sound of two metals violently hitting each other is unheard at each gesture. This is a work about the imposed silence of the Portuguese dictatorship (1928–74). In this sense, this is also a work about imposed negative spaces, and how, in turn, they generate creative formulations. These negative spaces are made of losses—something that is no more—and absences—things that are lacking but that no one can really say were ever there. But, almost like what happens with an oil painting covered in cracks, losses not only represent some form of absence, but they also call attention to the fact that something was indeed there. In the case of Negative Music, the striking silence of the clappers made visible the loss of the spoken

word, the loss of the natural capacity to make a sound. The disappearance of that sound made their presence ever more relevant. Melo e Castro rehearsed this idea once again in the 1977 recording of Negative Music, by starting the 16 mm film with a montage stating: 'This film has sound'—the enunciation of the sonic qualities of the film connected to the absence of any sound made those gaps visible. The palpating nature of those gaps can also be seen in the relation between efforts of historicization and preservation.

With a historiographic practice mostly led by artists, such as Ernesto Melo e Castro and Manoel Barbosa,^{[note]2} absentia and loss would also come to characterize official art histories until the turn of the millennium (Madeira 2007, 2016, 2017). There are many reasons for the absence of this period of the avant-garde from official art history, and most of them are related to the Portuguese political situation in the 1970s when tension was at its highest point. Portugal suffered one of the most prolonged dictatorship periods of the twentieth century (1926/1933–74), which was characterized by massive political persecution and repression, as well as a high degree of illiteracy and poverty (cf. Rosas 1996).

Many of the works produced in Portugal up until the mid-1980s dealt with societal issues—including themes inherent in the Revolution of 1974, the Estado Novo (1933–74) and the Portuguese Colonial War (1961–75)—a factor that cannot be ignored when thinking about the absence of records and documentation that led to their early invisibility (Madeira, 2007, 2012, 2016, 2017; Madeira et al. 2018). That is the case of Negative Music and Identificación, but also Rotura (Rupture), created by Ana Hatherly in 1977, or Luís Vaz 73, created by Jorge Peixinho and Ernesto de Sousa in 1975. Their peripheral position in the overarching artistic context explains, or is confirmed by, the lack of systematic collecting efforts from public art institutions, or even the lack of consistent and detailed historiographic efforts up until recently (Madeira et al. 2018).^{[note]3} As memories of those who experienced these works fade away, it becomes evident that gaps in our historical fabric are intertwined with cycles of remembrance and forgetting. As traces disappear from public memory, or become inconsequent due to an active de-

contextualization—which is a consequence, for example, of the dismantling of relevant personal archives⁴—bodily action becomes numb, in a persistent state of potential that ceases to be materialized.

One last example regarding Negative Music illustrates an aspect of the potentialities that emerge through the cracks of systematic performative practice. Besides the 16 mm film (meanwhile digitized to video and made available online), Negative Music has recurred in other forms and through other artistic apparatus. A re-enactment activated by the artist and curator Natcho Checa in 2017 at ZDB Gallery (Galeria Zé dos Bois) (in Lisbon), in celebration of the first Portuguese happening, was one of the most prominent recursive actions of this work after Melo e Castro ceased to perform it in about 1977 (Madeira et al. 2018). The re-enactment brought the careful choreographed performance to the present, carrying with it a whole set of vibrant potentialities in itself. In an interview one and a half years before the re-enactment, E. M. de Melo e Castro (2015) mentioned that he celebrates any form of interpretation of the score. According to him, the piece has been performed many forms in the current configuration. ‘But there is more’, he said; ‘there is a way of performing it that no one has ever tried’ (Melo e Castro 2015). The score presents an alternative route, one that replaces specific physical actions with poetic aesthetical representations of ‘searching for someone’s eyes right in the middle of the street’, ‘being utterly alone’ or ‘the restlessness’ (see fig. 1). According to the artist, this alternative script can be interpreted and performed, with one or more performers, at any given time. The absence of performative discourses that meet the discursive proposition enunciated by Melo e Castro in 1965 is not accidental. Nor are the creative and mnemonic affordances that such claim unveils and promotes. Perhaps more introspective, but nonetheless embodied, this small detail of an artwork with such a history is a clear example of the fluid potential that can emerge from the cracks, and what gets excluded through systematic recurrences of curated remains.

The tale of disappearance is constructed through those curated remains and focuses on what is missing or was never there. Feminist epistemologies, led by scholars such as Judith Butler, Donna Haraway, Trinh Minh-ha or, more

recently, Karen Barad (2007), suggest, however, that these exclusions do not represent the totality of neither the artwork nor the stories that co-constitute its manifestation. These exclusions are a product of ways of seeing that are performed and re-performed, becoming the consolidated fragmentary story of an artwork that is manifold on its onto-epistemology. To use Chimamanda Adichie's words, the story of their absence can become these works' single story (2009: n.p.). And the danger of a single story is that it flattens a multiple experience and excludes many other stories that are also at the core of this artwork's actual and virtual existences. And the danger of a single story, as posed by Adichie, is that it creates stereotypes, that are 'not untrue, but... are incomplete' (ibid.).

On exclusions: Agential cuts, and diffraction

The physicist and theorist Karen Barad has abundantly theorized on the issue of inclusions and exclusions (2007, 2011). According to Barad's perspective (also called agential realism), any analysis or observation (as, for example, a narrative account of a story) first consists of an act of measurement (Barad 2007). Agential realism makes visible the inevitable relationship between the ways of knowing a given phenomenon, say a performance artwork, and the determination of what that phenomenon is considered to be, or its measurement. In this sense, Barad does not separate measurement from the phenomena, refusing the idea of an 'outsider's look', as any way of looking is influenced by one's own apparatuses. This perspective echoes Amelia Jones's (1997) text "'Presence" in absentia: Experiencing performance as documentation' in which she proposes that every way of experiencing a performance is in itself fragmentary.^[note] Exclusions, in this sense, exist in every act of looking, analysing and knowing. Knowing is thus performative, as it implies an utterance, or an act, that does something in the world (cf. Austin 1962). The act of measuring then implies the creation of a given existence, while at the same time erasing other existences. Narratives of absence contribute to the continued disappearance of these artworks. Limited archival traces become the bricks of the only story that is being constructed about performance works.

In the specific case of Negative Music, for example, the systematic manifestation of a single interpretation of the score maintained by the use of similar apparatus led to the disappearance or concealment of other forms of interactions. In order to make evident the agency of these measurements as well as of the things that are measured, Karen Barad calls them agential cuts. And, according to her, the only way to reduce these agential cuts and their inherent exclusions is to engage in 'ethics of entanglement':

An ethics of entanglement entails possibilities and obligations for reworking the material effects of the past and the future.... Changes to the past don't erase marks on bodies; the sedimenting material effects of these very reconfigurings—memories/rememberings—are written into the flesh of the world.... What if we were to recognize that differentiating is a material act that is not about radical separation, but on the contrary, about making connections and commitments? (Barad 2011: 150)

Diffraction those acts of measurement, or to denote a more critical and difference-attentive mode of consciousness and thought' (Geerts and van der Tuin 2016: n.p.), is one of the ways to take in the ethical responsibility that comes every time we perform agential cuts. The authors trace the genealogy of the use of the term and suggest that diffraction fulfils the need to 'include' the often excluded Other. The authors suggest that as methodology diffraction disturbs heteronormative, male, Western-centric perspectives that populate discourse and readings of matter:

Thinking diffractively steps out of the phallogocentric, reflective logics of producing the Same all over again by acknowledging the differences that exist, while at the same time pointing at where the problematic reductions and assimilations of difference have taken place... Rather than employing a hierarchical methodology that would put different texts, theories, and strands of thought against one another, diffractively engaging with texts and intellectual traditions means that they are dialogically read 'through one another' to engender creative, and

unexpected out-comes. And that all while acknowledging and respecting the contextual and theoretical differences between the readings in question. (Geerts and van der Tuin 2016: n.p.)

The possibility of reading diffractively, mirrors how trans-versality and trans-disciplinarity (along with other qualities with the prefix trans-) can be seen throughout Barad's works. Geerts and van der Tuin further suggest that Barad aims to expand the proposed relational ontology across the disciplinary fields of thought (or, in some sense, the apparatus of epistemology), entangling our ways of seeing and thus create new practices. In the case of the study of these disappearing and disappeared performative artworks, one possibility lies within a conceptual reframing of the realm of absence as related to something more than loss—entangled to a wide spectrum of possibilities that are yet to be explored. In the words of curator and theorist Gilly Karjevsky, thinking through the gaps could be seen as an exercise that brings binary positions together and explores the spaces in their intersection:

Every gap is matter, is substance in itself, which occupies the space in between. Gaps in understanding are formed through the emergence of (or the search for) a language at a time when the old one is not completely dead yet, when new terminology peeks through the cracks, when lost terms are found again, or are being renegotiated. Such gaps become space of production to experiment with new material, new becomings, which open up new possibilities. (Karjevsky 2019: 450)

Reacting to absences, diffracting performative practices: REACTING TO TIME: The Portuguese in performance and Identificación

The artistic project REACTING TO TIME: The Portuguese in performance, created by Vânia Rovisco in 2015, is one of the artistic explorations that emerged from the gaps. Tasked with transmitting a history of Portuguese performance works to the future through 'bodily practice', the first undertaking of the project REACTING TO TIME appeared in the public sphere through a call for participants, which was made through multiple outlets, including on the

Fundação Arpad Szenes—Vieira da Silva's (FSAVS) website. The following text introduced the choreographer Vânia Rovisco's project:

Between 1972 and 1985 the performance was inscribed in the history of Portuguese art through a series of events that put Portugal in tune with the international artistic avant-garde. 'REACTING TO TIME, Portuguese in performance' takes this period as a reference. Vania Rovisco now brings together a set of strategies to transmit this information.{{note}}6

Along with the text, a call for ten to fifteen participants aged 16 to 45 was made with those taking part expected to attend a free workshop and be available for selection for the final presentation. The workshop took place daily from 10 January to 14 January 2015 from 7 p.m. to 11 p.m. and, according to the call, the project would then travel in Portugal to Guimarães and Torres Vedras, before going to Blanca in Spain, and then back to Porto in Portugal, with the final performance to be presented in Torres Vedras on 26 and 27 March 2015.{{note}}7

REACTING TO TIME: The Portuguese in performance according to Rovisco,

wants to up-date the specific bodily memory of [Portuguese performance art's] early experiments. Access the source of that information, update it, pass it on to direct experience and present it publicly: these are the goals of this project. It's about building a living archive embodied in the present. (AADK 2016:n.p.)

On the first day of the workshop, Rovisco (2015) explained that the invisibility of the initial Portuguese bodies of performance was at the core of her motivations to pursue and develop this project. She introduced the artwork by handing out the score of an artwork called Identification—besides the artist's body, the only material trace of the work that has survived to the present time. The purpose of the workshop was, as she clarified, to train our bodies so as to materialize Barbosa's work. This would be done not only through the analysis of the artist's score but also through the 'transmission' of the bodily practice that had taken

place first between Barbosa and Rovisco. Indeed, after being provided with the score, Rovisco addressed all the elements of the performance that were absent from the score—Barbosa’s motivations, the performance narrative, what was supposed to be there and what would be impossible to convey in words, like gestures, rhythms and durations (fig. 3). After performing the piece with Barbosa and teaching her body how to make specific gestures, Rovisco set herself to transmit the work, but this time to the workshop participants. The final presentation would then be a continuation of the process of bodily transmission, in this case between the workshop participants and the audience.

Rovisco began to describe the score for the re-enactment by providing the context of the original performance work: having come almost directly from Angola after the Portuguese Colonial War, Barbosa decided to make a happening in Barcelona in 1975—*Identificación*—as a gesture to identify with the Catalan people, still under the oppression of the Francoist regime. The artwork consisted of two parts. The choreographic score, however, is concerned with only the second part, as the first was meant to be performed by the choreographer. The second part consisted of four performers, two males and two females, walking in a straight line while performing mechanical gestures. The very rigorous score aimed to recreate an atmosphere of oppression and aggression performed by the male performers, followed, in the last moments of the performance, by a cathartic expression of liberation by the female performers.

The score review process highlighted the possibility of performing a complex but relatively feasible materialization, although Rovisco wondered how much the score would have to be adjusted to fit the FASVS gallery’s space, and how to adapt the score to the variable number of participants. While the score presented straight-line action (fig. 4), Barbosa made clear to Rovisco that a folding screen would separate the audience from a sort of backstage area. Performers could go around behind the folding screen and reappear on the left side, performing the action continuously, as mirrored in the pages in the score. The available space at FASVS gallery, on the other hand, include an L shape space with stairs, and performers would have to use a lift to get from the end of

the straight line and walk vigorously to the beginning of the next scene. In the course of the workshop, the bodies tried to find ways to occupy the performance's own negative spaces while, at the same time, co-producing aspects of the history of the work, which unfolded through their materialization.

Diffraction histories of performance

Rovisco did not aim at pursuing the artist's vision verbatim. Every single transmission, starting from the first held at FASVS's gallery, was a unique event. In fact, to date, every presentation has occurred in a different space, with different people and, as she recalls, her process has also changed with every presentation (see fig. 5 for a selection of moments from five different transmission processes). Rovisco explained that the first transmission (at FASVS) was the most processual and experimental. By reviewing its documentation, along with her own insights into aspects of the performance, the choreographer consequently revised her own process. Also, rather than attempt to constrain any personal aspect of their bodies, Rovisco (2015b) tried to work with their idiosyncrasies. Because bodies do matter.

Rovisco posits that, from her perspective, the most equitable transmission of *Identificación* was one that had three male performers and two female performers. According to her, although the space was challenging, that transmission allowed her to see the bodies in the work and to better portray the tensions and conflicts she sees in the original artwork:

Each time I transmitted the artwork, and each time I saw the results I was more and more embedded in the artwork's history. Manoel did *Identificación* after the Colonial War. He told me 'We waited and waited in the jungle, and out of nowhere we had to leave'. And then they fought. And then they would go back to waiting. So I think *Identificación* was precisely that. A game of confrontations between passive aggression and passive reactions that occur sequentially until something gets loose. When I saw that subtle relationship, I came to appreciate it even more. (Rovisco 2015b)

According to Rovisco, all performances succeeded in transmitting the artwork in the bodies of participants. Duration is part of the artwork, and when associated with repetitive gestures it becomes, in her opinion, incredibly violent. She explains how in the Portuguese city of Porto the longevity of the transmission event, which lasted much longer than any others, allowed for growth in tension before the moment of catharsis: 'It almost seemed like it broke the spell... And all presentations had that, so they worked' (Rovisco 2015b). Sometimes Rovisco (2015b) used strategies to increase tension in the audience, suggesting that they could leave whenever they wanted: 'To see them wonder if they should leave or not—that's part of the tension... They have to assume the responsibility to leave.' The tension was also apparent in the audience who were witnessing the performers' actions. Two audience members referred to the tension explicitly, mentioning a back and forth between conscious awareness and an almost violent need to endure a process that seemed endless. ⁸ Their words resonate the above-mentioned excerpt from Rovisco's interview in ways that make evident the material affordances of the process initiated by the choreographer, and the potential aesthetical practices that become a source of entangled knowledge, transmission and affect.

Back to the very first workshop, it is possible to say that the footsteps that echoed around the FASVS gallery while participants were running to reach the performance cycle start point were part of the work's ambience, such as with the other minor improvisations that occurred in other transmissions. These are the details that fill the gaps and that, according to Rovisco (2016), make the legacy of Identificación visible in the bodies that do not necessarily have any connection to performance. In this sense, it is also possible to say that visibility of those bodies becomes a record in itself, that comes to matter through its performance. These materializations are as plural as the bodies that performed them. They matter diffractively. In this sense, the delegation to Vânia Rovisco and each successive group of participants allowed for a manifold increase in Identificación's agential cuts, as a set of productive and co-constitutive material-discursive practices that acknowledge alterity and, in turn, balance power relations in the creation of narratives about the artwork.

To date, the transmission of Identificación is ongoing and is sporadically presented in many different venues. Transmission also occurs when the artwork is recursively disseminated by its participants, by gestures, stories or interactions. Thus, we might describe its historicization as 'processual' as each materialization of the work as it travels the globe means that various local communities engage in its process thereby multiplying the work's perspectives and acting upon the materialization of the work's immanent possibilities.

On the permanence of change

Memory and its recordings—within these terms we can inevitably read both revolution and political defeats. In the future. You will be there with your unblemished way of seeing. Utopia.{{note}}9

The history of Portuguese performance art has been characterized by its absences and early disappearance. This article proposes that diffracting these narratives and exploring them through their gaps helps bridging known and unknown Worlds, or, in other words, presences and absences.

The potential of negative spaces was demonstrated by unveiling the lives of Melo e Castro's Negative Music. The occupation of those negative spaces was here exemplified by Vânia Rovisco's performative practice in the project REACTING TO TIME: The Portuguese in performance, which brings together participants from different backgrounds to materialize artworks and engage in the creation of historical narratives in the present.

Diffraction through participation develops new performance art matterings while promoting the acknowledgement of alterity in the historicization processes. The performative embodiment of Identificación not only ensued it transmitting the artwork and create new historical-material narratives in the present, but it allowed the creation of an active engagement in responsibility for preserving this form of artistic heritage. Participatory transmission processes such as Rovisco's REACTING TO TIME then seem to become a vehicle for gathering

more inclusions, namely from people outside the inner social circle of the artwork. The processes here enunciated bring to the fore the openness of performative practice to other manifestations, other measurements, other cuts. This otherness is implicit in any particular agential cut in any given materialization. Otherness, in this sense, amplifies the dislocation of authority from the artist and radiates towards a multiplicity of perspectives and bodies, creating an abundancy of material intra-actions at each encounter.

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Notes

1 The digitized version of the film can now be found on YouTube: www.youtube.com/watch?v=QsBJ46M8Gcc, accessed 18 June 2019.

2 The first attempt to historicize this genre in Portugal came from the artist Manoel Barbosa, who wrote what he called 'an essential chronology' in 1985.

3 That is not necessarily the case of Negative Music, given that the video recording of this piece was acquired by the Serralves Collection in 2007.

4 The scattered nature of these records might be a concern for future scholars aiming at studying this artistic genre. Most of the documents and material traces needed to produce these histories belong to personal archives that are yet to be mapped and catalogued. This also increases the risk of losing the integrity of those archives, as they are more prone to be sold and dismantled.

5 Barad's agential realism has been applied to the study of visual artworks by the art historian Amelia Jones (2015).

6 The Internet call for participants, as available on Facebook and other outlets (accessed 9 January 2015). Translation by the author.

7 This workshop was the initial step of a documentation process with the aim of safeguarding Identificación's material-discursive performative practices. The description of the process can be found elsewhere (Marçal 2017).

8 Selected members of the audience were interviewed in regard to their perspectives about the work. These interviews took less than fifteen minutes and were based on the following dimensions: representations about the work, emotional reactions, physical reactions, cognitive reactions and perspectives about the future of the work. These were held less than a week after the first performance of the piece.

9 Ernesto de Sousa, 'To perform' (excerpt), *Opção*, n.º 101, 3 de Março de 1978. (Translation by the author.)

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Rovisco (2016) Interview with Hélia Marçal, coffee shop near Teatro D. Maria II, 3 November.

Captions

Figure 1. Negative Music's score. Courtesy of the artist E. M. de Melo e Castro.

Figure 2. Still of video from Negative Music, www.youtube.com/watch?v=QsBJ46M8Gcc, accessed 18 June 2019.

Figure 3. Detail from Identificación's score. Courtesy of the artist Manoel Barbosa.

Figure 4. Vânia Rovisco performs the standard mechanical gesture while being watched by the artist Manoel Barbosa (2014). Courtesy of the artist Vânia Rovisco.

Figure 5. Composition showing pictures of the five different renditions of Identificación through Rovisco's process: (1) Lisboa, Portugal; (2) Guimarães, Portugal; (3) Torres Vedras, Portugal; (4) Blanca, Spain; (5) Porto, Portugal. Courtesy of the artist Vânia Rovisco.