

The Chant of the *Chora* — On Márcio-André's Performances

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Without any doubt, Márcio-André, the Brazilian performance artist and sound poetry genius, is one of the most interesting phenomena of the aforementioned artistic areas in the contemporary scene. The young Brazilian artist is *grosso modo* contemporary, which means, if we take into account Giorgio Agamben's elucidating observations, a person "who firmly holds his gaze on his own time so as to perceive not its light, but rather its darkness. All eras, for those who experience contemporariness, are obscure. The contemporary is precisely the person who knows how to see this obscurity, who is able to write by dipping his pen in the obscurity of the present" (44). Márcio-André is perfectly able to see in this obscurity and to extract something from the dark when he dips his pen into it and writes on the walls or on the surface of things in a radically poetic language which is rooted not only in obscurity but also in the technical apparatus that produces it. And it is at this very point that we face one of the central questions posed by the outstanding *oeuvre* of this young artist: the possibilities of language in an era after the collapse of the Gutenberg Galaxy. The work of Márcio-André constantly focuses on the dynamic relation between language, technical media, and space. In this sense, the Brazilian performer's project is a search, a quest for a reinvention, for a re-foundation of the poetic language and of poetry in general, within the boundaries and possibilities of a post-typographic episteme evoked by Provenzo.

In his famous essay "Die Kunst und die Künste," Theodor Wieselgrund Adorno calls attention to the miscegenation and crossbreeding of different forms

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and genres in art, which leads to the total disappearance of solid boundaries and dividing lines between classical forms and methods (158-9). This special phenomenon described by Adorno as *Verfransungsprozess* has its origins in the Wagnerian idea of *Gesamtkunstwerk* and in the transgressive aesthetics of the modernist movement, but it began to be recognized as a regular artistic strategy only in terms of the postmodern cultural canon. Baudrillard, in turn, reactivating Adorno's idea of crossing boundaries, which he calls metastasis, emphasizes that this total transgression and disrespect for limits characterizes not only the art scene but also the fields of economy and sexuality of our present (5). In his essay "Contaminações," Márcio-André calls this process—in my opinion with an obvious Baudrillardian or even Deleuzian inspiration, if we take into account the key idea of the constant schizoid flow of desire with its de- and reterritorializations—*contamination* (*contaminação*). In his view, the phenomenon of contamination marks not only artistic production but also the whole existence of our contemporary culture. "Contamination is not based on the principle of a hierarchical exchange between the contaminated and the contaminator. There is in fact a mutual contamination between the participating elements. ... Nothing is stable, everything is in motion and it moves based on substantial, spatial, qualitative, and quantitative contaminations" (9-12).¹ This very idea of a postmodernist trans-aesthetics based on the notion of contamination—the generic dissemination of forms, spaces, and qualities—constitutes the core of Márcio-André's performances and other artistic activities.

In the performances of this Brazilian *enfant terrible* we can trace the influences of the Brazilian concrete poetry movement, the vivid heritage of the sound poetry tradition, and the presence of multidisciplinary inter-media art projects. And if we are speaking of trespassing boundaries, crossing lines, and contaminations, we cannot forget that these ideas are strongly related to Brazilian culture, which is considered to have arisen from the mutual fertilization of three different cultural traditions, namely the pre-colonial indigenous heritage, the colonial canon, and the African superstratum. Márcio-André is an essential Brazilian artist whose work allegorizes in a dense manner the hybrid character of Brazilian culture.

In addition to the aforementioned influences of concrete poetry and inter-media art, the historical tradition of sound poetry also constitutes an important reference for Márcio-André. From the Dadaist movement, through the neo-avant-garde to the present, we can think of such names as Hugo Ball, Henri Chopin, Dick Higgins, Bob Cobbing, Enzo Minarelli, and Endre Székárosi. The aleatoric music of John Cage should also be pointed out as one of his main sources of inspiration, without forgetting the importance of contemporary electroacoustic and electronic music, both high- and lowbrow (Pierre Henry,

¹ The translation is the author's.

Pierre Schaeffer—industrial techno, noisecore, Einstürzende Neubauten, Sonic Youth, Atari Teenage Riot, etc.). The radicalism of neo-avant-garde performance, Fluxus, and happening artists seems to be also an evident trace. In fact, Márcio-André managed to inscribe himself in the most radical and existential tendencies of performance art. Artists such as Chris Burden or the Viennese actionist Rudolf Schwarzkogler put their own lives at risk in their performances, searching for an authentic existential truth in the limit-experiences exhibited in an artistic project. This Nietzschean quest appeared in Márcio-André's best-known performance, staged at the ghost-town of Pripyat, in Ukraine. The small town was the epicentre of the nuclear catastrophe of Chernobyl in the 1980s, but even today the level of radiation can lead to serious consequences and health damages if one remains in the area for more than an hour. Despite the warnings, the Brazilian artist remained in the middle of the deserted town for several hours, reading poetry out loud. This radical performance earned him the nickname of *radioactive poet*.²

Therefore, we can see in a historical perspective the origins of a unique and fresh performance art in which language, vision, music, writing, and noise constitute an overwhelming horizon. Language and sound—not just the voice of the artist, but also the sound of an electric violin frequently used in the performances—lose their very origin and fixed meaning thanks to the permanent modifications, loopings, and effects. The voice of the artist, the sound of the instrument, the strange noises produced by the “manipulation” of small domestic objects—where it is easy to recognize the heritage of the concept of the Duchampian *objet trouvé* and the readymade—detach themselves from the producer, thus making it impossible to establish an evident relationship between the producer of the sound and the sound itself. Everything is mediated through the technical apparatus of an effect-station, there is no more organic language and sound, every utterance is mediated. There are no more “innocent” words or sounds, everything is filtered through a complex technical apparatus, everything is modified, effected.

If we take a good hard look at the performances of the artist staged between 2010 and 2014 in different venues and spaces, we can see that, even though each of them is a unique and original art event, there are a number of recurring structural elements always present in the spectacles. Several times (for instance in Évora, Lisbon, and Budapest) the performance started with the toll of a small copper bell, followed by the recitation of a poem: “This is a temple / The body is a temple from the inside and from the outside / We can only understand the temple from the inside of the temple / We are temples of each other.” The chiming of the bell and the recitation of the poem allow us a

² More can be read about this performance in Márcio-André's essay “Contaminations,” cited above.

particular interpretation. What we face here is a ritual horizon. As if the ringing bells and the recitation indicated the beginning of a profane liturgy. The bells call the spectators to participate in this profane rite, while the poem explicitly evokes the image of the temple, the sacral space of religious activities. We should not forget Hugo Ball's legendary Dadaist performance, the recitation of the poem "Karawane" in 1916, which was also done, according to the performer's memoirs in a quiet liturgical style (Elderfield xxvii-xviii). Ball's theatrical recitation indicates the very beginning of the tradition of modern sound poetry, a tradition in which the performative art of Márcio-André proudly stands.

Like the German modernist, Márcio-André also celebrates a mass; a mass that has nothing to do with Western religions, but that refers to the other great mystery of our culture: art and representation. In the era of the post-secular society, which after the rationalizing, and thus essentially secularizing tendencies of modernity, seems to reactivate the lost connections with transcendental spheres, Márcio-André practices an art that approaches the rite and the ritual. The performance, in fact, begins after the recitation of the quoted poem. The artist starts to produce strange sounds with different objects and his own voice and with the help of an effect-box and a looping machine. The performer's voice does not enjoy a privileged role between the maelstrom of different sounds; the human voice seems to be only one of the several, modified sound layers, which suggests the idea of a total dissolution of the dominant subject of modernity. The human voice as the vehicle of structured language and utterances loses its dominant position and becomes just a mere sound, produced by a technical apparatus. The performer at the same time projects various texts on the walls and the surfaces around him. Hence, space is activated and ceases to be neutral. It starts to be filled with a strange vibration of texts and lights. It is transformed into something unstable, constantly moving; it is contaminated. Even the spectators cannot escape from this dynamic spatio-textual game. The projections appear also on the surface of their bodies, deconstructing the dividing idea of a piece of art as an object of contemplation and a contemplating subject. The public also becomes part of the game. If we go back to the idea of the ritual interpretation, what we see here is a special kind of rite of passage. After the convocation of the public with the bells to construct a temple, the artist initiates them, makes them participate in the mystery, in the very construction of the temple, which is without any doubt the event-work of the performance.

The recited poem at the beginning of the performance is actually the only linguistically coherent element. It constitutes a sort of door or threshold for the spectacle. After the recitation, language loses its coherence, its logic, its structure, and it is no longer able to transmit any evident message. To interpret this "language loss," I turn to Hans-Ties Lehmann's reading of Aristotle. Lehmann, referring to the central notions of Aristotelian thought—logos and logocentrism—emphasizes the fact that the word *logos* used to mean not just

speech or reason but also a sort of clear and systematic structure (of speech and of things), and causality and transparency of the construction (63). Language as *logos* loses its dominating power in Márcio-André's performances but this does not mean that language disappears, it is still there on the surfaces and bodies through the projections, but also in an acoustic form. What language did lose is the *logos*, the transparency, the hierarchy, the inherent law, the structure. It becomes a monotonous *bruissement*, something mysterious, magical, and ritual, something which does not carry any message or evidence. The idea of the non-logocentric language contaminated by the *opsis* and the sound constitutes a sort of amalgam which echoes the very notion of the *chora* elaborated by Julia Kristeva. For Kristeva, the *chora* is "a preverbal realm prior to and distinct from the symbolic realm, one that is subversive of the symbolic's masculine, overly rational character" (Thomas 260). A heterotopic space before dominance, before the structure of the *logos*. A radical and heterogeneous space, an unreal and irrational place where the rules of teleology, linearity, and homogeneity seem to be suspended. *Chora* is the "defetishization of the rational, masculine logos as the ultimate horizon of human understanding and a re-embedding of the subject in material history, bodily affect" (261), the very place of dissemination or, if we are willing to apply Márcio-André's terminology: the place of the contamination. In the *chora* of Márcio-André's performances we find a total and radical juxtaposition of poetry, sound elements, music, visual games, and body movements in an effervescent contamination. "This is a temple," says the performer at the beginning. A temple where one sings the chant of the *chora*, the praise of heterogeneity, multidisciplinary, miscegenation, juxtaposition, and dissemination. And Márcio-André is not just the singer of this chant but also the producer of the *chora*, and all we have to do is to open ourselves to this siren song and let the contamination begin.

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