Reflections on presence.

Abstract:

This essay discusses the notion of presence in improvisation processes, mainly considering their occurrence with technological mediation. Our proposal starts from the improvisation *A-Round Table* and it develops into this performative-writing. This interactive and interdisciplinary reflection accommodates the different perspectives of the members of the connection *Mulheres de Improvisação*, which invites the reader to reflect on issues based on ideas, corporealities, sounds and images. From these performances and experiences, we conclude that improvisation is a process that always puts us in front of new layers and new states of presence and the current context of virtual relationships brings us different possibilities to feel present.

Introduction

In facing the challenges of digital cultures and new technologies, and the complexity of the models of our societies and diverse living conditions, the need to deal with the notion of presence and its varieties, becomes pressing. Presence is a key aspect of the improvisation[1] processes and a current theme in improvisational research. This is so, especially in the context of the pandemic year of 2020, in which virtual-contact situations were pervasive in our routines.

This improvisational research was performed, virtually, in 2020, by the connection[2] *Mulheres da Improvisação (MI)*[3] *- Women of Improvisation (WI).* We

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[1] We conceive improvisation as a practice, pertaining all the performative arts but also extending to our daily lives, that is, to our social relationships.

[2] We prefer to use the term "connection" rather than "collective" as it is normally adopted, considering that we are structured as individuals maintaining, developing and improving their own perspectives, but also exploring deeply the points of contact with each other. This organization allows us to remain autonomous and develop our research, reflections and discussions in mutually enabling artistic processes.

[3] MI is an interdisciplinary group formed by eight women, in 2020. We are researchers from different nationalities, working in Brazil. We are artists-researchers of dance, sound art, philosophy, performance, poetry, media art, theater and circus. We exchange knowledge and understandings, respecting different academic and artistic perspectives and empowering women by breaking up with thoughts, actions and structures resulting from ethnic-racial and gender prejudices.

created the improvisation *A-round-table*, a performance in which we get together for an philosophical breakfast to discuss the theme of "presence". The recording of the performance is available on youtube[4] and this text is thoroughly linked to specific moments we address.

Here we propose a performative-writing that emerged from that improvisation and present interdisciplinary monologues on presence in interaction, based on that shared experience. These monologues form an interdisciplinary group-dialogue, presenting different perspectives, aspects and concepts from an artistic-conceptual interaction. You, reader, are invited to perform with us, in reading and reflecting on the questions, images and sounds proposed by each of us. Ivani Santana addresses (1) improvisation and readiness to act; Lígia Tourinho, talks about (2) the body's paradoxes and the absences in the artistic-performative experience; Nara Figueiredo, presents (3) inner narratives and the experience of presence in participatory sense-making; Ana Emerich (4) addresses impermanence as an improvisational act; Walmeri Ribeiro refers to (5) the politics of affects and the coexistence experience; Tânia Martin Pérez presents (6) bodies in mediation; and Líria Morais talks about (7) the disturbing presence of the unexpected.

In our final remarks, we highlight the presence of technological devices as tools for intermediating our connection. A connection that occurs not only by the generation of digital images, but also in our composition, stresses the fact that, without those devices, our encounter would not have been possible. We conclude that in those virtual encounters, there are opposing tendencies of being absolutely

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[4] Link: https://youtu.be/-e84gCc3n-s

present in that 'digital-real' scene or of being totally immersed in our own narratives, and our connection happens in between those extremes.

(1) In Promptu

IN PROMPTU (Latin) = state of attention, ready to act. IN (in) + PROMPTUS (readiness). A-Round Table is a shared experience of improvisation strategies. Stimuli are drawn from one woman's action, functioning for the other as an ignition element. It may be due to the color of the mango and other foods that become points of relation, or the audio feedback that can become a creative element for some or a disturbance for others. Improvising is this state of attention that makes us ready to act with what affects us by the system in our sensory-motor and affective possibilities. We then propose an intersemiotic translation (Plaza, 2008) of this text written by corporealities, sonorities and visualities. It is an embodied knowledge to be observed, reflected and discussed in and with the experience. This does not mean that we are prevented from talking about the topic, quite the contrary, the question is "how" to approach the subject. It is important here to speak "with" and "through" improvisation, and not "about" it. Our interest here is to deal with our bodies of Latin American women, taking into account our culture and our own way of doing. It is to bring to the improvisation and to the text an aesthesis (Mignolo and Vázquez, 2013) that seeks decolonization of feeling, seeking to detach us from the aesthetics of the north, but without disregarding them. What we offer is for and from our experience of this performative perception/action (Noë, 2004) constructed in a shared manner. We know that our action will have an impact on the unraveling of the process, as it is a complex dynamic system, a co-dependent relation that is

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established in the journey itself, at the exact moment of making yourself present. A world of possibilities that are organized by our coupling with the technology itself, which, like the guide cane for the blind, becomes our way of entering this world of interactions.

(2) And an Artistic-performative Experience

The artistic-performative experience creates existences that gain completeness through manifest absences. Presences in a performative act are partly materialized by their absences. That which is not there causes that which is present to be consummated. The absences are filled by the inner world of the one who witnesses the artistic performance. Those who watch start to manifest presences resulting from their imagination which complete the performative triad - the performers, the staging and the spectator. The presence manifested in the scene is the result of this paradox. "What is true of the experience of the work of art is, quite generally, true of the human experience. The world shows up for us in experience only insofar as we know how to make contact with it, or, to use a different metaphor, only insofar as we are able to bring it into focus. (Noë 02)".

Performing in pandemic times, amid virtual connections and streaming platforms, places us before new layers and new states of presence. New gaps present themselves to be filled. In the absence of the conventional scenic presence - that state of the body within the scenic box - a new condition of the body appears. The presence of absence gives shape and concreteness to that distant state today. The memory of this state of the scenic body gives us the basis to unveil an update in the quality of presence facing the new context - the house as a performative space, the solitude of the living room and the kitchen, the intimate space of everyday life

updating itself as a scenic box in front of a co-existence mediated by technologies. As Alva Noë states, presence is manifestly fragile (2012).

(3) Experiencing Participatory Sense-making[5]

Ivani says "Presence. Pre-sen-ce…". There is an echo in her voice. The sensation of the words echoing causes me surprise, at first. It must be an intentional and short effect, I think. How clever!

"Presence of what? Of whom?" I ask. The echo continues with my own voice. I think it might not be intentional. It causes me affliction. I wonder: What is the reason for this unwelcome sound-effect? What should I do, given this unexpected situation? Will it stop, eventually? Will someone do something about it? Can I do something about it? May it be that someone is intentionally provoking it for so long? Should I just go with it? These are moments of micro-anxiety.

Meanwhile, deep waters appear. "Improvise! Im... Im-pro-vise.", says Ivani. Is this an answer to my question? I react with a smile because I think it is. She might be giving me a hint. After another second of reflection, I came to the conclusion that I should embrace the situation no matter the answer to any of those questions. "Echo! It echoes! It echoes", I say, in an attempt to both make sure that she knows about the situation and participate in the verbal dynamics that had just started - after all, echoing can also be taken as a dynamic in improvisation, as when one 'echoes' the movement or action of another person. She says "Ha, what?". Again: Is it an answer to me? The source of the sound seems different. It is probably not an answer to me. I think she might be talking to someone else, or doing something else. Improvising. I decide to feel the water and breathe.

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[5] Concept developed by De Jaegher & Di Paolo (2007). See also Di Paolo, Cuffari & De Jaegher (2018).

Was I present?[6]

(4) MAP

MAPA[7]

[ma·pa](#)

I) Ministry of Agriculture, Livestock and Supply.[3]

II) Territory design. Graphical representation, on a reduced scale, of the total or partial surface of the Earth, of a region, or even of a minimum space.

III) Imaginary of the things that come through our mouths and the words that we lack in the face of the country's socio-environmental policies. How do domestic sounds and toxic names compose traces and deviations, escapes and images? The body is a mouth that fails with invisible food that ruminates.

Sustaining impermanences seems to be an act of improvisation, a choice for perceiving gestures and writings of the bodies in space (of the scene and the paper), in constant movement of composition and disappearance. In this condition of presence, things also desire; the desire of things, the ephemeral images, and the improbable moments take part in the experience. *"A presence like a sudden song, like the voice of the wind singing in the fire"* (Paz 55). Listening is quietude because it invites the body to a certain stop, a *fermata*[8]. And we've known for a long time, with John Cage (1952) at [4'33"](#), that silence does not exist. Listening is also a latent state - neither alert nor passive. It is to be concentrated and available for what happens in time-space structures, when the ears are opened to a range of non-absolute

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[6] See Santana et.al. (2020) for a definition of the phenomenal character of presence.

[7] In Portuguese M.A.P.A. are the initials of the 'Ministério da Agricultura, Pecuária e Abastecimento' which is translated as Ministry of Agriculture, Livestock and Supply. 'Mapa' also means map.

[8] In musical notation, fermata is a symbol placed above a note, a rest or a bar line, indicating the sustain of a note in the air, on the limit of a temporal indetermination. In this sense, it is a gesture that escapes the musical score.

findings. For this reason, the unpredictability of performing the listening to oneself and beyond - as a movement in which singularity and contagion are in constant dialogue - seems to be a gap for understanding the rhythms, intensities and perspectives in improvisation. The creation of transitory and inventive states, be it in everyday actions or in artistic works.

24bit / 48 kHz. A presence when it reaches the ground, [breathes](). Beyond the body, no one passes.

(5) Affects

"[...] we are all in on the event together, but we're in it differently. [...]That's what I mean by differential attunement: a collective in-bracing in the immediacy of an affective event […]" (Massumi 115). Disquietudes that emerged during the weaving of our experimentations prompted me to read the book "Politics of affect" (Massumi, 2015) and, immediately, to the chapter "Affective attunement in the field of catastrophe". Being together in an experience of creation - A-round Table - seeking to give sense to the concept of presence, from a performative improvisation, sharpened the challenge of thinking about the act of affecting - in the Spinozian sense of the concept (2009). Presence is a relational concept, which brings with it the dimension of all carried out activities, whether subjective and|or objective. It involves affecting and being affected in a continuous movement of modes of existence and co-existence.

In times of catastrophes and [emergencies](), listening to a list of names of [pesticides]() approved by the Brazilian government puts us in state of alert (would presence be the best concept?). Thousands of pesticides present on a simple banana, on a mango, on the traditional Brazilian coffee…. Pesticides that travel

through our bodies, organs, and blood; that contaminate the rivers, seas, every living organism, and the earth. Pesticides that, like us, leave their traces wherever they go. We breathe, even if submerged, among the traces we cast into the world. Traces not so visible to the eyes, but rather felt by imprisoned bodies.

But, of what presence are we then talking about? Would our issue be presence or a politics of affects? It seems to me that we are discussing how to potentialize the ecology of affects and the power of an event.

An event that occurs in the power of the encounter. An encounter that, in its turn, is capable of moving us to paradigmatic changes in our ways of being, seeing, building and inhabiting the world.

(6) Displaced Presence - Connection at the Distance Opened by Technological Devices

Before and after everything, food and coffee.

Wake up…

Each one in a different place… Houses we inhabit, or not, welcome us today and take us to a virtual room that connects us without leaving home. Each body, physically present in a specific territory, perceives itself digitally expanded, and in this manner, the *self* on the screen also becomes *another*. Through cameras and microphones that connect bodies and screens scattered between Uruguay and Brazil, we find ourselves in the reflecting-doing that we are performing. "I dance with my body, understanding that it is a body built in relation to technology ... technology that enhances, that limits, that restricts. But something will always limit or restrict" (Ivani said)

The encounter on the digital territory has its own rules, its trails and borders. Ivani says "I am now cooperating and creating sense with myself. With the microphony that arises between my speech… from a device that reverberates in the other… in the other… in the other…" (Ivani said). Each tool has its abilities and restrictions. Our presences on the screens are given by the images of the bodies, by the sounds that are emitted, and also in the construction of the image as a whole. The framing of each one allows one to see parts of the space and, at the same time, it leaves the certainty that you cannot see everything in it. What appears and what does not, build the set of frames together. Silences, quietude, food, sounds, dances, words, bodies that shake, noises for (un)bearable moments. Convergences crossed and provided by technological devices. Technologies, facilitators of this encounter, appear as eyes and ears that emerge in the space we inhabit, quite often invisible, but for moments evident. The presence of the devices as a tool that intermediates the connection that occurs not only in thegeneration of images, but also composing with it, highlighting the fact that, without them, this encounter would not have been possible.

Before and after everything, food and coffee

chew - swallow - digest - process

(7) Disruption

The disturbing presence crosses, disharmonizes, creates inevitable captures and/or deviations from the agreement in the improvisation of the experience in real time. From the perspective of the improvising performer, it may be linked to the sharing of a certain sensation that pervades the senses of whoever is performing the action, that is, of the performer himself (herself) in a very intense and, therefore, disturbing

way to the senses of those who watch as well. The action of sucking on a mango, for example, can cause a certain sensation triggered by the taste, smell, texture, etc., which one feels, creating sensory images (Damásio, 2002) for the performer in the act of his poetics, provoking on those who watch similar sensations. The mirror neurons (Lameira, Gawryszewski, Jr., 2006) are activated, as if both, captured by the state of the action of sucking on a mango, performer and audience were doing the same action… action… action.

While the improviser moves, the clouds in the sky, the waves of the sea and his(her) blood circulation move, in the present time, without voluntary control. Becoming aware of these events while performing also generates the creation of a poetics that accompanies a certain flow of the latent presence of the surrounding things. If the improvisation is on the street, in the urban context, there are noises and social flows as a fragmented way of being in the world. The connection, with certain deviations from the agreement, can be an improvisational stimulus. The disturbing presence in this case is the one that interrupts causing a crisis in the system, suggesting that something should be reorganized in an update, towards an evolution… interrupted conversations, voices that speak louder, people who appear a lot in the scene, disharmonize, provoke a new direction…

How to find the ethics of the agreement to preserve the happening coexistence in real time? This is always a theme that permeates the practices of the game AND (Fiadeiro and Eugênio, 2013), but to change one's mind without considering the others is to disharmonize the syntony? Or is it to generate motives and noise? What do the walls and streets say about it? They always make me

expect other things during the [dance](#)... They agreed on something else on this coffee table…

We build our path in walking

An event occurs in the power of an encounter. It provokes changes in our ways of being, seeing, building and inhabiting the world. Performing in pandemic times, amid virtual connections and streaming platforms, puts us facing new layers and new states of presence. New gaps present themselves to be filled. The presence of devices as tools for intermediating a connection that occurs not only by the generation of images, but also in our composition, stress the fact that, without them, this encounter would not have been possible. The worlds, words and sounds that pervade the encounter create noisy trails. The table is set and remade as long as people offer their own realities and qualities of presence. A conversation has surprises, agreements, frictions, crossings, harmony, syntony, disturbances... The disturbing presence invites reorganization towards evolution. But does this mean disharmonizing or creating? To perform with the unpredictable is a movement in which singularity and contagion are in constant dialogue. In doing so, we seek ways to make ourselves present to one another, to pre-sense what is coming and to act. We form a complex dynamic system that, therefore, is not a sum of presences or movements, but a codependent relation that embraces dissensus and establishes itself in its own journey. We can be intensely present in these events or immersed in our own narratives. Talking about this is somewhat imprecise and unauthorized by the need to be present. But there is undeniable attunement of presences in a women's connection.

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