

The Expanded Scene: Some views on theater in the 21st century

Gabriela Lírio Gurgel Monteiro

Universidade Federal do Rio de Janeiro, Brasil

What is expanded scene? How should we think the theater scene today? What are its limits, boundaries and elements leading us to some specific characteristics? Expanded sculpture, expanded film and expanded literature have already been discussed, but not until recently have we started to think the expanded scene in such terms. Why? My intention in this article is to outline a scene built upon the expanded field. As in a painting, I intend to outline strokes, indications that characterize the expanded field, aiming to analyze it and focusing on theater. In order to contextualize contemporary art, I use the word expanded, as used for cinema, literature, visual arts and herein for theater.

In "Sculpture in the Expanded Field" (1979/2008), Rosalind Krauss argues for a new view on sculpture if we were to understand and contextualize new ways of making sculpture in the 70's/80's. Krauss states that sculpture needed to be revisited and she understood the expansion of the field in two ways - the first one related to artistic practice and the second one related to means of expression, both based on breaking from Modernism. In this sense, Krauss states that "many of the artists in question have found themselves occupying, successively, different places within the expanded field" (Krauss, 2008, p. 136), in an unplanned and continuous journey that goes beyond modernist demand for purity. Krauss argued that practice could no longer be defined in terms of means of expression. Instead, it should be defined by means of "a set of cultural terms, for which any medium-photography, books, lines on walls, mirrors, or sculpture itself-might be used" (Krauss, 2008, p. 137), which results in many artists being in different places within the expanded field of sculpture. Therefore, the artwork by an artist such as Joel Shapiro, for example, involves creating architecture images within wide spaces (landscapes).

Kraus' analysis is relevant, since the author argues for non-reductionist critics, which, instead of diminishing the effects of a field which is new and hard to filter due to the lack of boundaries and the multiple combinations, redefines the field of sculpture as the place where arts meet. Expanded field is therefore a network of contact and indefiniteness; it is rich exactly because it does not imprison artistic forms. On the other hand, from this viewpoint, it is important to understand the logics of the historical contexts of which we are part, considering mobility vectors and new subjectification processes. Art should move towards regular things, daily experiences. From the appearance of Kraus' text to art in the 21st century, countless expression contexts emerge in which artistic production and reception show that technology, science and art are becoming increasingly interconnected. Interactivity and connectivity principles demand new paradigms from art critics, as suggested by Couchot when describing how digital images establish new forms of interaction between those who create them and those who see them. According to him, there is a latent hybridization process involving the individual, the object and the image which brings about new subjectivity features.

As per Roy Ascott, for example, subjectivity will no longer be in a single point in space, it will be distributed by means of networks instead; according to Sigfried Zelinski, subjectivity is the possibility of action on network boundaries; as per Pierre Lévy, subjectivity has become fractal... (Couchot, 2009, p. 399)

As for literature, in *Frutos Estranhos: sobre a inespecificidade da estética contemporânea* (2014), Florência Garramuño analyzes the current moment, considering not only arts' lack of specificity that constitute the expanded field, but also communities in expansion that mark a literature outside literature. Literature's being outside literature results from a sense of disbelonging and, at the same time, interdisciplinarity, from art crossover. Disbelonging is related to deconstructing a sense of origin, the feeling of belonging to one single community, the mastering of technics related to some specific art form. Garramuño focuses on the lack of specificity within one single art form, which results in extreme radicalization of literary artistic production.

Such focus on the lack of specificity would be a way to create an art form

of commonness allowing for several ways of not belonging. Not belonging to the specificity of an art form in particular, but also, and above all, not belonging to an idea which considers art something specific. Precisely because in recent decades art has shaken the idea of specificity, in addition to media specificity, there is an increasing number of multimedia art forms or what we could call "unspecific art" (Garramuño, 2014, p. 16).

Referring to unspecific art and multimedia art leads us to seeing contemporary artistic practice as a practice in transit or as unspecific art, as per Garramuño. Moving along disciplines and by means the interchanges taking place between different media, the artist creates new ways to produce art, in addition to new ways to receive and circulate it. We can no longer categorize artworks in terms of their specificity; the only way to categorize them is by analyzing them one by one. In literature, there are relevant experiences incorporating countless forms and media (e-mails, blogs, photoblogs, photographs, images, etc.), which result in multiplied discourse forms. We find heterogeneity in artistic productions, not only in contemporary visual arts, but also in literature.

In contemporary cinema, the issue of devices is an interesting one; they are considered under several aspects – appliance or machine; epistemological, discipline or sexuality construction. It is interesting to think the device in terms of intermediation, which brings about new visibility and production systems for the imaginary. We will now resume the idea of communities and networks. Intermediations should be considered in an autonomous manner on one hand, and interconnected to other experiences and perspectives on the other hand. Expanded cinema breaks from the classic-narrative cinema standard (screened in a dark screening room for viewers), it breaks spatial structure and puts to the test not only space, but also production and reception forms, thus creating "new collective subjectivation equipment" (Parente, 2009, p. 34) and contributing to contemporary art. According to Parente, expanded cinema might be characterized in two ways: movie theaters reinvented in new spaces (the cinema trespassing the museum, for example) and installations that "radicalize hybridization processes in different media" (p. 41): immersive installations, virtual panoramic environments, creating what Dubois calls "cinema-effect". Such effect is not new; it dates back to the 90's, and puts the concept of cinema and art into perspective. In any event, "a cinema effect" is extremely diversified and multiform. It operates in all levels: institutional, artistic

and theoretical levels" (Dubois, 2009, p. 181)

Initially, I will include here a brief historical contextualization for the emergence of the expanded field in arts, considering specific subareas, such as literature, cinema and visual arts. This first division may seem contradictory, but I assume the debate on the expanded scene should not be built upon dividing expertise, but rather in a historical manner, allowing for interconnections and new intermediations based on articulations of arts which reflect the lack of specificity of contemporary artistic fields. Even though we might discuss several historic moments and approaches in literature, visual arts, cinema, theater and the other arts form, it is a fact that we are looking at a contamination zone that turns boundaries into undefined zones, resulting in hybrid forms of creation. Performing arts have always been associated to the other arts forms (such as music, visual arts and literature, of course), and upon the emergence of cinema, they seize techniques that expand a large field of experimentations resulting from the emergence of digital formats in the 1990's.

Hybrid staging: intermedia art

In theater, I call expanded scene the one that is not limited to making theater, as we know it in terms of conventional theater production and reception only, but rather articulates directly with different artistic fields, converging expertise from performing arts, audiovisual media, performance, dance, literature and photography.

According to Patrice Pavis, the word scene "throughout history has constantly expanded its meanings: scenery, then performance area, then place of action, time unit in act and, finally, the metaphysical meaning of brutal and spectacular event" (PAVIS, 1999, p. 42). It is clear that the use of digital technologies in addition to hybridity of art forms on the scene have changed the way we perceive theater and its metaphysical meaning, as described by Pavis. The contemporary theater scene blurs boundaries between arts, which results in difficulties to define artistic production, which no longer appears to us in a clear manner. Works by artists and groups such as Phila 7, Felipe Ribeiro, Christiane Jatahy, Enrique Diaz, Robert Lepage, Bob Wilson, Mariane Weems, Wooster Group, Rimini Protokoll, Laurie Anderson, among many others, reflect the plural nature of researches related to theater,

performance, cinema/audiovisual, poetry, installation, dance, opera.

“What characterizes the contemporary theater scene?” is a question authors such as Hans-Thies Lehmann, Josette Féral, Béatrice Picon-Vallin, Izabella Pluta, among others, are interested in. The concept of scene is continuously transformed by fostering and experiencing new ways to use appliances and technology resources. Referring to Lehmann’s concept of post-drama theater, Silvia Fernandes looks into the fragmentary plural nature of contemporary scene in the attempt to clarify the comprehensive mapping by the author:

[...] the concept of post-drama is one of the many names that, at least for the last three decades, have attempted to explain the fragmentary plural nature of the contemporary scene, specially these odd types of total theater that, unlike Wagner’s *gesamtkunstwerk* [sic], reject totalization, and whose most clear feature might be the frequency which they find themselves in bastard territories, mixing fine arts, music, dance, cinema, video, performance and new media, in addition to preferring unsettled creative processes, averse to focusing on drama in order to build its theatricality and meaning (Fernandes, 2010, p. 43).

Despite the difficulties found in the author’s theoretical line of thought, which, in the attempt to characterize post-drama theater does not go deeper in different forms of aesthetic creation and analyzes a quite heterogenic panorama throughout sixty years whose only common feature is “the distance from the drama sphere” (Fernandes, 2010, p. 50), which makes the analysis not very instructive at times, we should acknowledge the effort made in the survey and the diversity of analyzed creation processes.

For Josette Féral, studies on theatricality and performativity require a new understanding of the theater scene. By eliminating the primacy of text, performance theater changes the direction of the scene by raising the question of the real, thus shaking traditional performance structures – “a fundamental real, sometimes violent, emerging from the heart of acting, challenging the viewer in a brutal manner” (Féral, 2011, p. 10). As a result, new reception strategies for theatrical work are adopted as the scene’s boundaries and limits are put into test. Féral differentiates the use of the real, as of the 60’s, by performance (and the feeling of violence conveyed the presence of performer’s acting body) and other scenes, as for example in the movie “Battle of Chile”, in which the cameraman films his own death

live. The impact of the real is also caused by the mobility of the viewer, who finds himself looking at several media, trying to apprehend the violence of images, of words, of the body and, above all, of the interaction between different elements in which he finds himself submersed and impelled to create meanings to that go beyond the limits of the scene itself.

In this sense, I believe the expanded scene changes the way the artwork is received, allowing for new perception manners and putting the viewer in the position of artwork mediator. Interacting with multiple possibilities, from using audiovisual devices up to different media for sensorial contact with non-conventional materials and spaces, makes the viewer experience a type of reception in which he feels invited to travel through different times and spaces. I believe the contemporary scene is where times, spaces and the hybridity of confluence between the arts articulate, meet and connect.

On the other hand, it is important to understand that the emergence of digital technology, especially as of the 90's, has reconfigured the image, which is now different for being created in loco, by being multiplied on the scene, regardless of being staged in Italian style, a scene in "Lage Park"¹ with projections on trees or an installation that changes according to a ballet dancer's choreography.

Aiming to understand the complexity and hybridity of contemporary art forms, Pluta looks into some relevant aspects that bring about a new artwork reception model. The increasingly intense use the internet and cyber systems are mentioned as some of these aspects; new perception manners allowing for several "sensorialities" in view of digital technologies; new views on the body by means of "transformed identities influenced by virtuality" (Pluta, 2011, p. 43). According to the author, there is also constant hybridity between artworks and daily space which leads to a broader process in which we are included and which we sometimes do not notice, experienced in a fast manner by new perception models for understanding reality.

[...] performance and technology bring into play perception transforma-

¹ Lage Park is a public park listed as a historical and cultural site in the city of Rio de Janeiro at the Brazilian Heritage Department (Iphan). The park hosts several cultural events every year and houses the School of Visual Arts, which has over 2000 students and where some renowned Brazilian artists have studied.

tions that constitute cyberculture [...] integrated projections in this type of performance multiply the viewer's perspective, a multivision. It also represents a relevant change for the actor/actress, for now he/she can interact directly with the camera, as a vision machine (Pluta, 2011, p. 48).

Paul Virilio states that we need new outlooks based on the lack of immediate perception of concrete reality, that is, we are looking at videoperformance (Virilio, 2014, p. 26) of image transmission (p. 27), in which the immediacy of the moment trespasses distances that could not be conceived in the past; the infinitely small becomes the infinitely large, thus changing the scientific conception of object apprehension. Field and space depths are overruled by the depth of image exposure time. The aesthetics of disappearance proposed by Virilio goes against the aesthetics of appearing stable (analogic) images in physical media, such as paper, screen, wood, etc., thus addressing unstable (digital) images, which in many cases are not apprehended in a conscious manner, since they move so fast.

New teaching methods – (trans)media teaching for performing arts

We should consider in what way watching/being by means of images becomes a key issue when addressing the expanded scene, in which we feel time as being more intense, faster and unable to be apprehended, and, on the other hand, the perception of a dilated unfolding space that proliferates in many others, also incomprehensible. Such new look on the scene brings about some perplexity and anguish. Some experts wonder if it is really possible to define a research field in such an intangible domain. It seems as if we are looking at a fragile place, a place of endless possibilities that might not constitute a field of sustainable theoretical articulation. In addition, there is this wrong idea that, when we create an expanded scene, we lose the capacity to use methodological techniques and procedures based on theater scene studies. It would be as if there is no feasible basis in view of the patchwork of new connections that are made possible by technology developments and crossovers of emerging artistic experiences. Therefore, some find it hard to understand that intermedia scene might result from works based on the physical action method, by Stanislavski, or on studies on Brook's empty space, or even on the interconnection between performance studies and photography, just to mention a few examples. Ranci re questions this idea:

Those issues of crossing the borders and blurring the distribution of the roles come up with the actuality of the theatre and the actuality of contemporary art, where all artistic competences step out of their own field and exchange their places and powers with all others. We have theatre plays without words and dance with words; installations and performances instead of 'plastic' works; videoprojections turned into cycles of frescoes; photographs turned into living pictures or history paintings; sculpture which becomes hypermediatic show, etc., etc. (Rancière, 2012, p. 24)

Defining such mixed fields is challenging, different from the heterogeneous conception of Wagner's *gesamtkunstwerk*. For Wagner, the ideal theater work brought arts closer, while maintaining their aesthetic specificities and individual expressions. In contemporary art, defining specificities or highlighting individual features is no longer in question. It seems to me that ignoring such artistic practices and its impacts on scene reception processes is to preclude a large portion of existing cultural production. Above all, we should study contemporary productions considering the expanded scene as artistic expression resulting from the intrinsic relationship between men and technology which constitutes a fruitful dialog precisely because it fosters a nonhierarchical scene, in which viewers and actors systematically exchange places, showing what is unknown, what cannot be *a priori* defined, what Rancière defines as being "a new art form reflecting a new intellectual adventure" (Rancière, 2012, p. 25).

In Brazilian universities, studies on the expanded scene are still at an early stage. In addition to experts' being resistant to establishing research laboratories able to cover all academic-artistic projects on the matter, there are also financial difficulties involved. They lack equipment and infrastructure, especially in public universities, to create appropriate spaces for theoretical-practical laboratories, and the practice part is then limited to other physical spaces which lack the appropriate conditions to maintain the research, frequently outside campus, adapted in such a way as to assure projects may be continued. Though in a less limited manner, the same happens with artistic works performed in theaters and other locations. Technical experimentation is not as easy for us as it might be for a Wooster Group, a Bob Wilson, Castellucci, among others; we lack funds for implementing ideas, which are usually also adapted to contingencies of financial bottlenecks in a cre-

ative manner. On the other hand, in Brazil there are an increasing number of researchers, artists and groups working in intermediality-related projects. Today, it is impossible to deny that intermedia culture is quite present in the life of children and young people and such fact has a direct impact on their learning, not only due to students' natural interest on the matter, but also in view of the way we perceive the virtual environment in which we are included, allowing for new ways to create, work on and reinvent images interacting with bodies in the expanded scene. The classroom is transformed by new points of reference and devices which used to be limited to creation methodologies based on techniques and conceptions easier to define, but no less riveting and creative. The fact is that today the possibilities for creating and receiving intermedia scenes go beyond traditional teaching methods and require revisiting and creating teaching methods to be constantly revisited, based on in loco contact with a huge range of possibilities due to countless image devices, several media and meeting of artists with very different backgrounds. In defiance of an apocalyptic view of an increasing isolation due to the fact technologies are here to stay, which might lead us to some kind of gap, as suggested by Virilio, I take the risk of believing in new teaching methods which exploit new forms of creation, based on empirical experimentation without forgoing supporting theoretical horizons.

Let me raise some issues that I believe are relevant for researching the expanded scene when teaching drama. Historically speaking, Pluta points out two important moments of the intermedia scene: the first one in the 90's, when projection screens become relevant; the second one, as of 2005, when actors' training starts being questioned in view of the emergence of a critical thinking component. Thereafter two aspects converge for the emergence of new forms of actor training: pluridisciplinarity and interdisciplinarity in renowned theater school's curriculum (influences of visual arts, performance, dance, photography, literature, philosophy, sociology, physics, etc.), which breaks out the boundaries of artistic limits and expand the relationships between the arts and the other disciplines; and the creation of laboratories "based on an interdisciplinary perspective in defiance of hybridization" (Pluta, 2015, p.58). Pluta argues for a transversal laboratory allowing for the creation of new methodologies aiming to experiment devices, performativity; a key space comprising scene, research and technology. As an example of the merger

between art and science in laboratory, Pluta mentions the work by performer Julie Wilson-Bokowiec and musician and electronics designer Mark Bokowiec. They have developed a device called Bodycoder, which was conceived by Mark, in 1995. Bodycoder allows recording and manipulating the human voice in an interactive manner, by means of a glove and a vest worn by the performer. Each new performance requires the Bodycoder to be revised and adapted, it is not a fixed system. The artists have created the kinésonique concept to describe sound creation by the body movement of the performer wearing the device. The work methodology includes discussing the idea for the performance, reconfiguring the Bodycoder, the creation process, staging the performance still undergoing the creation process, rehearsals and final staging. Body and technology are fully integrated in the creation process, which uses the laboratory space to go deeper into experimentation and observe the effects of presence – a key concept for the expanded scene.

Another example of laboratory creation is the immersive installation Branco (Portuguese word for white), created in 2012, by Mirella Brandi² and Muepetmo³. Branco explores several experimental narratives through the relationships between performing arts, visual arts, music and expanded cinema, aiming to experiment and provoke new space-time perceptions. The artwork is part of the color trilogy which started in 2006, when the artists were invited to perform *Cinza* (Portuguese word for grey) in the Live Cinema Festival. In 2012, they were selected by Rumos Itaú Cultural program and created Branco. They are currently working on *Chumbo* (Portuguese word for lead).

Branco was conceived to be performed in different spaces (expositions, theaters, multi-purpose rooms, auditoriums, etc.) and aims to lead viewers to a journey of “visual immersion”, in which each viewer creates his/her subjective understanding of the artwork. By using fog and smoke and receiving the direct influence of several light projections, “*Branco*” builds up a visual dramaturgy without making use of screens or other media. The artists manage to alter viewers’ spatial perception by manipulating smoke particles touching particular sources of light. Sound is live and expands even more the perception of created images, evoking a wide range of feelings.

² Multimedia artist, light designer and director. Coletivo Phila 7 founding partner and art director

³ Musician, producer and composer from Institute Audio Engineering (SAE), in Holland.

Muepetmo has created in laboratory the research concept called Instrument Audio Orchestra (OAI, as per initials in Portuguese), which gathers compositions played in acoustic instruments and recorded on sampler to be manipulated live. In specific spaces, the artist investigates how physicality of sound waves is able to cause body reactions in viewers. The assumption is that, even when they are inaudible, some sound features are able to change the perception of time.

Going deeper in our perception ways by means of this trilogy has changed the way we look at narrative possibilities, including when other artistic forms merge, really different artistic forms. The color trilogy has provided a new way to communicate in a subjective manner which is expanded and strengthened by each new experience, with light and music only, or when merging other artists and artistic forms.⁴

Laboratories dealing with expanded theater carry out hybrid researches which require participants to be familiar with other subjects. In many cases, the use of technology makes it necessary to have electronics technicians, digital engineering technicians, in addition to edition software, image treatment and projection. Regardless the methodology adopted, based on each artwork's specific characteristics, there is no doubt such type of creation requires professionals from different areas of knowledge. The team has to interact constantly, in an integrated action on scene, which means involving everyone in an *in loco* creation process. The audiovisual device, for example, should come after the actors, it is a key element for creating actions and interrelations established on the scene. Likewise, images created in software, such as mapping, should not be prepared separately from the scene creation process. Art, technology and science used to be unrelated, but now they are together, moving along transversal lines, blurring boundaries and articulating hybrid ways to create and receive scenes.

⁴ Statement by Mirella Brandi, on 05/16/2015, from their Facebook page. Url: <https://www.facebook.com/mirellabrandixmuepetmo>. Accessed in: 09 Oct. 2015.

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