

Still Life and the NonPhilosophical Stone

Matteo Bonfitto

Universidade Estadual de Campinas – UNICAMP, Brazil

A man is sitting on a chair placed stage front. The audience is illuminated with the service light, the stage behind the man is completely dark. He wears a dark gray suit. His attitude is one of dynamic stillness, at the same time incisive and ambiguous. With his column slightly tilted forward, he keeps his hands almost joined together. There is something in his hands. He says nothing, verbally; he seems to be observing the public and himself, simultaneously. Looking internally and externally at the same time. A second man enters, takes the chair on which the first man was sitting away and leaves the stage with it. The man who was sitting does not move: he continues in the same position as if nothing had happened. Slowly, keeping the same attitude, he takes a more vertical position with his spine. He gets up and puts on stage what we now perceive to be a stone. There are two other stones, smaller, close to the one he places on the stage at that moment. The man stands up, buttons up his jacket, still observing the audience for a moment, then turns his back on it.

A universe is established by performing such an action. Quietly and unexpectedly, the light over the audience fades out and a huge cloud appears, hovering over the man. We see it partially, only its bottom part with a circular contour. This is not a static representation, but rather one of substances in a gaseous state that continuously move and that refer to a cloud. Given its proportion to the stage, it hovers like a mysterious presence, almost threatening. As if we were catapulted, a universe characterized by a horizon devoid of any reference system materializes. Time and space suspended.

The man walks slowly to the back of the stage and disappears. Gradually we perceive another man, also wearing a similarly colored suit, advancing toward the proscenium arch. Under the enigmatically hovering cloud, he carries on his back what appears to be a large stone; in this case it is not an ordinary stone but rather one shaped like a wall; a white wall. He drags it to the mouth of the stage, straightens himself up and the wallstone as he does so. At this moment, the silence that had prevailed is interrupted; strange noises are heard coming from the wallrock: it seems to breaking up internally, crumbling, slowly ...

(SL, First notes)

Approximately four and a half minutes passed from the beginning to the end of the

sequence described above. We are at a performance of *Still Life*, directed by Greek choreographer Dimitris Papaioannou.¹ Having given this brief introduction, I now wish to cut to a few clarifications regarding what I propose to do in this article. This is not a diagnosis or radiograph of an artistic material discarding the medical metaphors but rather an attempt to establish a *Dia/logos*² [dialogue] that emerges from the contact between this work and a spectator's perception (myself) that fluctuates and resists landing in one spot; a *dia/logos* a kind of participant diary that occurs between a performance and an observer in the midst of processing the performance who also relies on knowledges drawn from how art is made, but who also opens up to possible knowledge that may emerge from that contact. So, I propose a synchronic and diachronic cut here, devoid of any claim to truth, but moved by a dislocation generated by a direct contact with Papaioannou's *Still Life*. This article, therefore, has no intention to reduce his work to a set of explanations and much less to engage in deciphering the production to disambiguate the perceptual processes it solicits or placate the experiences that it produces. Unlike the information on the medicine bottle that tells the reader about the specific substances that compose it, I propose in this case only one cut, a possible cut, that separates and then puts back together the phenomena [produced by the production], but does not define them permanently.

The tip of the blade that produces this first touch, as often happens, is applied to what is more apparent, and which is on the surface. In this case, the chosen surface is what gives identity to things: his title. I begin, thus, with the title given to this work, *Still Life*. It's impossible to avoid the numerous associations generated by this title. Immediately, it may refer to a related genre with the fine arts, and more specifically to painting, through which things or inanimate objects are represented, a form predominant in Western art, especially since the sixteenth century. There is, anyway, an important distinction to be made in this case, which is related to the versions in English and Portuguese of the term used as the title of this show.

¹ Born in 1964 in Athens, Greece, Dimitris Papaioannou is a multifaceted artist: painter, choreographer, director of experimental theater, costume designer and author of more than forty comic books. He was projected onto the international scene in 2004 when he directed the opening ceremony for the Olympic Games in Athens. He has also worked with Edafos Dance Theatre and Elliniki Theamaton, among other collaborations.

² Trans. note: the author wishes to create a compounded neologism from the word *diálogos* here that resonates with the Greek, but it only works in Portuguese, breaking down the word 'dialogues' into *dia* [day, or daily, referring to a sort of diary of his perceptions and feelings on viewing the piece] and *logos* [words, communication].

The term in English *Still Life* adopted by Papaioannou, places us before a tension involving an almost obsessive attempt to give life to what is apparently still. However, the Portuguese translation *Natureza morta*³ takes us to a much less powerful notion, since it provides no tension but one devitalizing opposition between the terms 'nature' and 'dead,' generating an almost opposite sense to that produced by the English. While the latter refers to life that can permeate the things that do not move in space, whose molecular vibrations are not perceived by the naked eye, the Portuguese term implicitly sees the absence of movement as the absence of life. It seems that Papaioannou, in entitling his production *Still Life* wished to access the tension already mentioned, that intends to recognize and to excavate, or retrieve the life existing in everything, even in its apparent stillness. In *Still Life* this excavation is perceptible through the presence of the stonewall, the cloud, by how the performers exploit corporealities, by the different silences that are established, the sounds produced by the manipulation of objects, by the tapes as they are ripped from the floor, and by effects recorded electronically. These features work in the performance to generate sensory effects on many levels.

A cut in this case an incision coming from the act of giving a title can produce a lot of possibilities and surprises. It can generate openings that correspond (or not) to what we had imagined; diseases can be discovered and aromas hitherto unknown can be experienced in an unforgettable way. Writing here, the initial cut I've made through associations with the title will slide further through the sections of the material in this case the scenic phenomenon *Still Life* while the cut gradually produces an expanding fissure, defining a direction. Or rather, a 'vector' for my discussion, one that doesn't determine quantity, that is neither linear nor causal, but which is determined by a particular logic. This vector brings together three notions: 'meditative exercise,' 'stone' and 'nonphilosophy' which will function as devices that seek to capture/evoke some present or latent qualities in *Still Life*.

Meditative exercise

One of the first associations, and perhaps a trap, that emerges from the use of the word "exercise," is that of a repetitive activity that is taken to reach a defined goal.

³ Trans. note: *natureza morta*, literally translated as 'dead nature.' The Portuguese shares in common with the Romance language the reference to the form, c.f. the French "Nature morte."

For example, in terms of the exact sciences, the point is precision: an exercise, or series of experiments, is intended to generally create conditions for problems related to a particular theory so that it can be understood in its complexity and resolved in various ways. Thus, the practitioner of these exercises can hone perceptions related to the theory and is stimulated as well, at the same time, to develop his creative abilities. When we think about other areas, we recognize exercises of a different nature, as in sport, yet the causal relationship permeated by objectives established a priori seems to prevail. The curious thing here is to realize how much these practices lose sight of an implication related to the root or origin of the word in question. In fact, if exercise comes from *exercitium* training, exercise it also comes from *exercere* to exercise, execute something. But the sense of exercise was not limited in the Latin culture to an applied operation, simply, but at the same refers to the condition of exercising, the exercise "in itself," perceived as a relational, performative force. Exercise, thus, as a recreation or representification of a set of conditions emerging from the act of 'exercising.'

A fuller reflection about meditation would go beyond the scope of the present inquiry, but it is possible to weave together some considerations here, albeit briefly. This ancient practice was not only present in Eastern cultures, as Pierre Hadot (1981; 1995) shows us. Meditation, which he also calls "spiritual exercise" involves procedures and operating modes that cannot be approached as homogeneous, given the multiplicity of cultures and contexts in which it is practiced. Still, the search to develop oneself, or the "cultivation of the self," which involves processes to enlarge perception and distill attention and concentration, can be seen as fundamental aspects of this practice.

This preamble serves as the trigger of my vector, leading me to observe that Papaioannou's *Still Life* can be seen as an artistic material that instills a type of meditative exercise. Following this line of thought, one particular aspect stands: the relationship between time and silence.

After the four and a half minutes already described, during which a progressively dense silence was interrupted by the subtle crumbling of the stonewall, the piece progresses maintaining somewhat the same "musical" pattern, with significant portions of silence being interrupted by noises of diverse natures. But rather than saying silence, it would be more accurate to say "silences." There are actually dif-

ferent types of silences that emerge throughout the performance. The silence that permeates the opening sequence is very different from that present in the final moment, for example, in which the performers bring a table and chairs into the audience and eat together, in front of the public. The musical pattern alternating with silences focuses, in a determining manner, on the perception of time. The prevailing silence makes time dilate, also working on the various expectations the audience may have.

Along with the relationship between time and silence, three other aspects contribute to potentially instill a meditative exercise in *Still Life*: the lighting, the score of actions performed by performers and the autoreferentiality of its narrative. A dim light illuminates the scenic area almost all the time, there are no major variations of light or chromatic changes in the piece; an environment is created, as if we were facing a suspension in time and space. As executed by performers, the physical scores often follow a slow, detailed, careful pace, which values the relationship with the scenic elements. The autoreferentiality of the narrative, clearly recognizable, prevails, amply. There is no history or clearly defined situations, and the fictional beings are not representative of individuals or types, they function as actants. In other words, these beings primarily serve the development of the narrative, they are not vehicles of psychological units.⁴

Thus, one is confronted in *Still Life*, not by a type of entertainment that tries to keep the viewer "lit" through an unbroken chain of immediately decodable stimuli, but with a dramaturgy constructed by states that produce fleeting meanings; a porous drama, full of empty spaces that allow the viewer to experience a relationship of reciprocal incompleteness with the materials placed in scene.

Once articulated on stage the penumbra, the silence, the physical scores and autoreferentiality, besides the atmosphere produced by the "cloud/cosmos always in movement" these elements work, gradually, to instill a meditative attention in the spectator that conquers the frustration of not immediately understanding, or of potential fleeting boredom that results from the expectation of constant scenic surprises a meditative attention that can enlarge certain perceptual channels. In this way, a quality of attention is activated in the spectator which goes beyond a

⁴ I examine these aspects related to acting in O ator compositor. *As Ações Físicas como Eixo. De Stanislavski à Barba*. São Paulo: Perspectiva, 2002, 2009.

mere passive observation of what is happening 'outside' – in this case on the stage – in order to look, simultaneously, at themselves. This distillation of the spectator's attention as well as the concentration it demands fundamental elements of the meditative exercise seem to play a key role in *Still Life*.

Stone

The presence of the stone in *Still Life* is manifested in many ways and on many levels. In interviews and statements Papaioannou noted that one of the creative stimulations for the production was the myth of Sisyphus, also seen through the lens of Albert Camus.

In Greek mythology Sisyphus was considered extremely astute. Considered a rebel, he cheated death twice, provoking the gods. As punishment for his rebellion he was condemned by the gods to push, for all eternity, a great stone to the summit of a mountain, then let it roll down the mountain, and then repeat the same action indefinitely.

For Camus, the myth of Sisyphus represents much more than someone who has been punished for daring to exceed the metron.⁵ Camus considered the "labor of Sisyphus" as a true matrix of meanings. If on one hand this work reveals how futile efforts can permeate our existence, such as the eternal search for meaning in life, or the creation of political utopias that inevitably turn into dystopias, on the other, Camus was not imprisoned in a nihilistic stance. Rather, the author of *The Stranger* chose to problematize human choices and their implications. In this sense, Camus takes Sisyphus out of his seemingly hopeless condition of victim of divine punishment to recognize, through it, the importance of awareness. To cite Camus:

It is during that return, that pause, that Sisyphus interests me. A face marked by arduous work, so close to the rocks, it is itself stone! I see this man going back down, with heavy but equal step to the torment whose end he will not know. This moment, so like a breath that resurfaces as surely as his misfortune, this moment is that of consciousness. Every one of those moments when he leaves the heights and goes deeper, little by little in the lair of the gods, he is superior to his fate. He is stronger than his rock.⁶

⁵ Understood in Classical Greece as "measured," the notion of metron concerns a parameter that divides right from wrong, and that once exceeded can ruin the whole community. This sense of measure, instrumental in the Greek paideia, can be seen as the foundation of ethos.

⁶ Camus, Albert. *O Mito de Sísifo*. Rio de Janeiro: Grupo Editorial Record, Edições Bestbolso, p. 34.

The repetition of Sisyphus' action thus ceases to be just a painful intensification of his penance to become an assertion, at the same time, of the absurdity of existence as well as of the possibility that we define and refine our own consciousness.

But, the point to be made here is that Camus' portrayal of Sisyphus seems to find echoes in *Still Life*. At various times in the performance, the relationship between the bodies of the performers and the stonewall engenders veritable amalgams that give life to a spectrum of paradoxical actions and optical effects. The absurdity in these moments becomes metaphorical, going beyond a tedious demonstration of clownish folly to provoke an estrangement that leads us to consider the possibility that absurdity does not emerge from individual behaviors alone, but from our very own condition as human beings. The apparent inability to use their bodies relegates the performers to a situation of equal footing with the stonewall, annihilating the Bodystone hierarchy. An important aspect that arises here, as Hannah Arendt well points out in her writings (Arendt, 2014), is that the quality of humanity, what makes us human, is not absolutely obvious simply because we have a head, a trunk and limbs. Becoming human implies arduous work, which cannot be dissociated from an individual's artisanal construction of consciousness.

The exploration of materiality in *Still Life* can be seen as expressive elaborations of Camus' theses. Not only the bodies of the performers but all of the production's elements—the stonewall, the lighting, the cloud that later will transform into a pliable cloudbubbleorganism, the sounds—are not used in order to accentuate immediately decodable signs or a familiar representation, but rather, to accentuate the condition of matter as it antecedes significance; significant both empty and processual at the same time that allow us to perceive the unfamiliar even in the things that we thought we knew.

Thus, all the elements, including human bodies, seem to be placed in an estranged dimension in *Still Life*, almost precultural, where we realize that we are made of the same material, beyond just carbon; as if everything could express itself in the condition of stone, thus revealing its own stoneness. As if in this dimension of "suspended life," everything that exists, organic and inorganic, human and nonhuman, necessarily inhabits the same place.

Trans. note: translation done from the Portuguese edition.

NonPhilosophy

Still Life places us in a particular cognitive environment, a meditative exercise that activates specific perceptual channels, which do not favor the illustration of stories and not even of given situations, rather one that creates an expressive, dynamic fabric that produces stimuli emerging from the exploration of materialities, generating experiences, impressions, suggestions, reverberations and forces that produce, in turn, associations, apertures and possible inferences.

As these interpenetrating procedurals surface, we are moved to a type of reception that moves away from the causal connection between understanding and experience. Displacement is familiar in contemporary arts, but even so, it is not easy to effect. Displacement, or dislocation opens us up, in the case of *Still Life*, to a deeper reflection on how experience is perceived and created in the performing arts.

With regard to experience, to what extent does it emerge from a tensioning with language? In other words, at what level does that which is representable imply a gradation of experience? What would be the relationship between the speakable and the rarity of experiences? Would it also be pertinent to say that the deeper the experience the less verbalizable it is? And if we consider some elaborations made on aesthetic experience, these questions acquire an even more complex horizon. On the one hand, Erika FischerLichte (2008), for example, recognizing the aesthetic experiences as liminal experiences, considers, in a way, that this class of experiences is contained within the limits of language and the representable, while philosophers such as Alain Badiou (2006) perceive the aesthetic experience as the possibility to produce a real aperture in the alreadyelaborated, in what is supposedly already known.

However, the perceptual horizon emanating from *Still Life* seems to be even larger and more distant. Even Alain Badiou, referring to the apertures mentioned above, restricts himself to a logic dear to Thomas Kuhn (2004), associated with paradigm shifts. Paradigm shifts are changes in how we see things, but this perceptual displacement does not necessarily imply a change of a perceptual horizon, or of logic in a deep sense, but in rearticulations of existing elements.

Perhaps in this case it is necessary to seek to develop opportunities to question one's own assumptions. In this sense, it may be interesting to draw attention to

François Laruelle's proposals regarding nonphilosophy. Laruelle chose the word "non" to create friction in relation to a discipline that he considers arrogant, because he thinks it an "excessive pretention" for philosophy to judge itself "able to account for the real". As Laruelle explains:

'Nonphilosophy' may seem abstract, because it deals with thought about a thought already formed. (...) It is, finally, a practice and I don't get tired of saying it a conception of life and existence. The idea of 'nonphilosophy' is that philosophy is not the last word on thought or what thought can [do], that man can [do]. (...) Philosophy constantly renews itself. And what we do is take these renewals of philosophy as an object, and then we deal with them in a nonphilosophical way.⁷

It is beyond the scope of this article to enter the complex meanders Laruelle proposes, meanders that often seem to go around in circles. Nonetheless, his critical reflections about the arrogance of philosophy and on nonphilosophical thinking, seen as a conception of existence, can work here as a fissure that provides glimpses of modes of intelligibility to be developed in order to perceive, more accurately, phenomena in general and other more specific phenomena such as scenic ones, in this case *Still Life*.

At the same time it is important to point out the inverse process, which is not limited to an interpretative practice. In fact, when referring to specific modes of intelligibility, I do not propose here to apply Laruelle's consideration to explain and unravel Papaioannou's work. I wish to recognize that artistic phenomena can amplify consciousness and modes of intelligibility, revealing connections albeit latent with explanation or elaborations that seem to want to maintain a condition of impermanence, or remain as a permanent construction site, such as the nonphilosophy of Laruelle.

The image of a construction site seems to be a promising metaphor, also in the case of *Still Life*. Imagine a construction site at a moment of pause, where workers have finished for the day, but the work is still there, manifesting at the same time its presence and latency. When passing in front of a construction site, we see the present but at the same time imagine a past and envision a future. The incursion

⁷ Interview given to the Portuguese newspaper Público (09/10/2001), entitled "Por um Pensamento menos Arrogante" (Towards a Less Arrogant Thought). See also: Laruelle, François. *Dictionnaire de la NonPhilosophie*. Paris: Editions Kime, 1998.

into experience can be suspended, seen from outside, as a moment of rupture that precedes what will happen, again and again. Perhaps this is one of the layers of meaning that permeates the final action of *Still Life*, in which the performers carefully take a table and chairs to the audience and then take a silent meal together, before leaving behind traces of an immobility that transformed itself into movement.

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Both the cut I made, as well as the vector constructed throughout this essay involved a relationship between concepts and specific perceptual observations upon seeing the production. This is about two creative processes performance and writing the second necessarily coming from the first, which manifest themselves in different ways, being both activators of images, associations and issues. But the second writing is a function of the first, and when the work is powerful, one often comes up against inexhaustibly unfolding elaborations (images, thoughts, perceptions, etc.). As has occurred in this case: far too many to mention in the space I have left here. However, there is one last element that should be mentioned in this essay: the political aspect one can see in *Still Life*.

When referring to Camus, Papaioannou also recognizes an implication in Sisyphus' travail that contrasts with those already discussed in connection with honing consciousness. Instead of focusing on consciousness, we can look at the effects that may result from a repetition that seems to have no end, generating a complex state, somewhere between vertigo and hypnosis. This implication refers to a situation in which a kind of crystallization seems to embed not only in the individual but also in social relations and in those established between cultures. This crystallization involves perceptual aspects that may determine, to some extent, logic and behavior patterns.

This process not only echoes psychoanalysis considering for example the persistent recurrence of trauma but reaches the body politic to the extent that may transform into a generative relational dynamic that affects the collective at many levels.

Thus the stone examined here can signify the perceptual and behavioral patterns that seem so deeply rooted even becoming concretely naturalized that makes us lose sight of possibilities for its removal. Large reflective flights would not be nec-

essary to perceive the presence of this 'stone' in many contexts around the world, including the Greek and our own context, that is, the Brazilian context. This stone unites us. A stonebridge.

. . . .

The feeling of incompleteness that comes from the impossibility of adequately developing these reflections in writing may be nothing more than an illusory drive, as the holistic pretension of philosophy is illusory, in the words of Laruelle. But perhaps what cannot be overlooked here concerns my initial cut regarding the title *Still Life* and its relation to the expanded notion of stone I have constructed in this essay.

Reflecting on how to capture/unveil life in a state of immobility, the idea of stone acquires numerous potentialities here. The honing of consciousness reflected in Camus, vehicle of materialities that amplify perceptual processes but which also can promote crystallization processes leading to the opposite path, trapping us in disruptive behavioral patterns. So if at the same time, we can see in the honing, or lapidary processes of consciousness a metaphor for the philosopher's stone that turns base metals into gold, I opt here to reinforce the notion of a "nonphilosopher's stone," which takes away any arrogant temptation to idealize, while remaining operant in a continuous present, in a state of continued uncertainty. As it seems to happen in *Still Life*.

. . . .

There are stones that can be extremely subtle, almost imperceptible, but that insist on making us believe that immobility is something irreducible.

And then, how to give life to that which, again and again, appears to be immobile?

So, then, which stone is yours?

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