

Disfiguring Figures

The political potentiality of Marlene Monteiro Freitas's choreographic work

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A B S T R A C T

Departing from the German philologist Erich Auerbach's foundational study on the genealogy of figura—a concept that, belonging to the three different fields of theology, rhetoric and visual arts, has laid the foundations for the theories and practices of Western European representation — and following the reformulations by Freud, Gilles Deleuze, and Lyotard of this influential notion of figura as indeterminacy between form and process, the visible and the invisible, sensible and intelligible, the corporeal and the spiritual, this paper wishes to address how the choreographed figures of ambivalence, hybridity and metamorphosis in Marlene Monteiro Freitas' works, namely, in her solo work Guintche, set the stage for a contemporary criticality of some of the structuring postulates of European modernity.

K E Y W O R D S

Marlene Monteiro Freitas, contemporary dance,
figure, figural, decolonial

Everything changes; nothing dies; the soul
Roams to and fro, now here, now there, and takes
What frame it will, passing from beast to man,
From our own form to beast and never dies.
As yielding wax is stamped with new designs
And changes shape and seems not still the same,
Yet it is indeed the same, even so our souls
In their migrations ever-changing forms.

Ovid, *Metamorphosis*

Through her choreographed figures, between the human and non-human, the animated and inanimate, the subject and the object, gender, race “species fluidity”? the Cape Verdean choreographer Marlene Monteiro Freitas, Lisbon-based and awarded the Silver Lion by the Venice Biennale in 2018—an award for the choreographer revelation of her generation—creates dance realms of amazement in a permanent play of disfiguration and transfiguration.

Summoning a considerable oeuvre, from her early pieces—*Primeira Impressão* (2005), *Larvar* (2006), *A Improbabilidade da Certeza* (2006), *Uns e Outros* (2008), and *A Sriedade do Animal* (2009-10)—the choreographer developed international recognition since her solo *Guinche* (2010), following with the group pieces *Paraíso – coleção privada* [*Paradise-private collection*] (2012), *de marfim e carne – as estátuas também sofrem* [*of ivory and flesh – the statues also suffer*] (2014), the duet *Jaguar* (2015) with Andreas Merk, and *Bacantes – Prelúdio para uma purga* [*Bacchae. Prelude to a purge*] (2017).

Influenced by strategies of hybridity, animism and the uncanny, her fictional constructs not only destabilize Western European theatrical apparatuses, as they unravel the assumption of the modern Western subject’s autonomy and stability, questioning its universality, and staging instead, creatures in relational and unstable processes of subjectification. In her own words, her artistic universe is anchored in ‘intensity, openness, and impurity’ (Freitas, 2013), with choreographic proposals organized through unexpected metamorphic dynamics, subverting any rational meaning or theatrical narrative. Therefore, heterogeneous in the singularity of each theatrical happening, the choreographer seeks the transmission of a force, or *pathos*, between the dance event and the audience, rather than the communication of a meaning or a message. For Marlene, as she underlines, ‘the theatrical experience of her dance works exists in a third space: that of the encounter between two forces, the one produced by the performance on stage and the other emanated by the spectator in the audience’ (Freitas, 2017). Thus, to approach Marlene Monteiro Freitas’ choreographic worlds is to relate to theatrical scenes that are always open and never self-enclosed, that (dis)organize themselves through strangeness and contradictory dynamics, where the relations between the visible and the invisible, cause and effect, perceiving and thinking — and from there to writing — can no longer be taken for granted as a unified discourse, but as unstable oneiric assemblages.

Marlene Monteiro Freitas was born in Sal, and lived in São Vicente, Cape Verde, until her early adulthood. Although her work goes far beyond identity politics or postcolonial critic, it is relevant to address the singularity of Cape Verde, an archipelago populated by Portuguese colonizers, which

between the 15th and the end of the 17th century became a relevant commercial trading place for the transatlantic slave trade. According to Françoise Vergès (2007: 141), the process of creolization originates from the slave trade in the first global capitalism, which by means of violence, inequality and survival, sets forth a continuous process of cultural imposition and appropriation; thus, it is not the result of a free and spontaneous encounter between cultures (Fernandes, 2006: 78). In this country grounded, therefore, in the triangulation of three continents—Europe, Africa and America—, the subject results from a process of adaptation and creation of an always open and new collective identity, different from the originating colonial one.

Creolization, according to Édouard Glissant, goes beyond miscegenation, which results from “an encounter and synthesis between two different worlds” (Branco, 2016: 11). Creolization exceeds miscegenation, and as Glissant postulates it is a “boundless miscegenation, whose elements are multiplied and the result is unpredictable. Creolization diffracts, while certain modes of miscegenation may return and concentrate” (Cit. in Branco, 2016: 11).

Vergès also mentions that the plurality of possibilities underlying creolization derives from its sense of “bricolage”, absorbing what is available, reinterpreting and recreating creatively new forms of cultural manifestations, distinct from the original ones (*idem*). This idea of creolization as bricolage, or as cultural cannibalism, in the sense that each subject appropriates the best of the other culture and reincorporates it, reinventing a new form, is relevant to understanding the aspect of creolization in Marlene’s choreographies. Thus, her work reflects this potentiality for openness that characterizes the processes of creolization, as well as the archipelagic condition of Cape Verde (where each island has its specific creole, its traditions and cultural manifestations). Especially relevant in the city of Mindelo, island of São Vicente, where she lived, was the influence of the commercial port, with the arrivals of new strangers and their novelties, as well as the peaks of collective emotion that accompanied each event on the island.

In addition, music, rhythm and dance, as profound cultural traces of Cape Verdean culture, leave their sensorial and bodily imprints in her choreographies. Of extreme relevance for her creative process, ‘music,’ states the choreographer, ‘allows [her] and the performers to access certain areas and specific imagery’ which otherwise would be impossible to access or transmit. (Freitas, entrevista).

Furthermore, as can be experienced in São Vicente Carnival, one of the keystone reference of Marlene’s cultural Cape Verdean heritage—the ritual of utopia, of being other, of metamorphosis and excess, ‘the festival of joyful otherness’ (Coderch, 1999: 15)—her work does not witness the destruction of opposites, but rather their circular structuring, where all unpredictability may occur. In other words, the choreographer seems more attracted by the tension and circularity between polarities than by emphasizing their oppositions. Among some of these polarities are the Apollonian and the Dionysian, echoing on the path of Nietzsche the differences between the rationality of the beautiful versus the formless and the overwhelming nature of the sublime, but also the poles between human and non-human animality, the subject and the object, the modern and the premodern, life and death, the animate and inanimate, the conscious and the unconscious, the clean and the dirty, the mechanized versus the organic and the visceral, just to name a few of the dichotomies often at play in her work.

In fact, Marlene's figures frequently embody the mechanic movement of marionettes and puppets, statues that are endowed with life, petrified human figures, hybrid creatures between the human and the non-human animal, with references to birds, dogs, horses, or apes, in a permanent process of instability and ambivalence. Opening space for the unpredictable and contradictory to be staged as if there were no contradiction at all, her dance works propose undefined, unstable, non-confined oneiric worlds, where familiarity and strangeness co-exist.

For each singular work the choreographer departs from an on-going and eclectic atlas of visual, musical and theoretical references that reveal her profound knowledge on various spheres—from Western history of art, iconology and anthropology of image to psychoanalysis—an atlas that is heir to the Warburgian methodology of art history and culture studies (*Kulturwissenschaft*). However relevant this structural mapping may be, the dance performance itself is neither a collection nor a montage of those references, but rather the result of an uncanny digesting process that culminates in the artwork, which according to the choreographer seems to have a life and a will of its own, one that herself is unaware of, and cannot control.

In a play with over-determined images and figures, her methodology is reminiscent of the four processes of the dream-work, which Sigmund Freud called condensation, dislocation, conditions of representability (or figurability) and second elaboration.

Thus, to see Marlene Monteiro Freitas' choreographic works, following Didi-Huberman's reflections on image and time, means to witness a complex temporality, 'an extraordinary montage of heterogeneous times forming anachronisms' (Didi-Huberman: 2017, 18). In each dance work, Marlene operates, as we will see below, with 'malleable cultural and cognitive tools, ductile wax tools that gain, between each hand and against each material (...), a different meaning and use value' (*idem*). It is in this paradoxical fecundity of the bodies materiality and of the temporal anachronism given by the images she conveys that her work allows access to multiple stratified times, because, as Didi-Huberman says, 'when forms survive, history opens' (Didi-Huberman: 2017, 35). In this time frame of the choreographic event that is, then, more than present, her dance works appear as a shock, a rip, an outburst that strangles in strangeness, as if they were a flash of light, leaving the spectator both confused and fascinated, sometimes outraged or disaffected. The reactions are diverse, multiple and disparate.

It is our belief that the idiosyncratic strangeness deriving from Marlene's work is caused, above all, by the instability not only of the composite figures she creates and which destabilize the viewer's expectations, but also by the dissolution of the most diverse epistemological frontiers, aesthetic, identitarian, gender, humanistic, among others, establishing a space of simultaneous contradiction, over-determination and hybridity. This openness, as we tried to demonstrate at the beginning of this reflection, is also engrained in the poetics of Marlene's culture of creolization as an open-ended process that reintegrates and appropriates references, in order to subvert the sources, and (re)invent the unexpected. This is inseparable from a decolonial praxis, an artwork as a form of life containing, as Glissant mentioned, the idea of creolization as a "poetics of relation" (Glissant, 1997). In addition, the process of creolization may also have a resonance in the processes of disfiguration and transfiguration that are engrained in her methodological practice.

Then, how does Marlene Monteiro Freitas' work revisit Western European epistemological and artistic legacy in order to dislocate it through strategies of condensation, transfiguration and conditions of figurability? How do her composite and hybrid figures open a discursive space for decolonial criticality-as-praxis? How does it propose visual and performative frameworks upon which to (re)address Cape Verdean entangled creole cultural traces, overlapped on a triangulation between Africa, Europe and America? These are some of the questions we propose to address in this essay, departing from a close reading of the long and ambivalent concept of *figura*, and figural work, and getting a closer look into Marlene's solo *Guintche*.

Disfiguring Figures

Whether they are musicians or dancers, Marlene names her performers as figures, since figures allow for greater openness and instability of play, form and content, and are less conditioned than theatrical characters. This reflects the relevance of the concept of figure in her creative methodology, requiring a deep historical investigation of the term, and its extended concept of *figural* work.

In effect, since the nineteenth century, artists have been questioning the mimetic relation between the real, representation and its *mise-en-scène*, and playwrights and dramaturges have been trying to erase from the scene the theatrical character as the illusion of a plausible subject, against an established bourgeois idea of mimesis. Indeed, with an uncertain status and a troubled mode of existence, since Robert Abirached, it is hard to evoke the theatrical character other than in a state of crisis (Sermon: 2004, 5).

In his well-known work *L'Avenir du drame* (1999), Jean-Paul Sarrazac unravels the complexity of the dramatic character, proposing for it the term 'Figures d'homme' (9), where the author points out that the symbolic elevation of the theatrical character is simultaneous with an accentuation of the body. 'La figure', Sarrazac refers, 'ne représente donc ni l'hypostase ni la dissolution mais un nouveau statut du personnage dramatique: personnage incomplet et discordant qui en appelle au spectateur

pour prendre forme; personnage à construire¹ (*idem*). One can trace these two relevant points in Marlene's work: on the one hand, the accentuation of the body by the relevance of the dance figure; on the other, the dialogic relation between the work and the audience, with the figural work being not only constructed by the choreographer, but also and through the gaze of each singular spectator.

In the mainstream choreographic lexicon, the work of the figure may refer to 'the movement that makes a singular dance execution a specific recognizable figuration, pertaining either to an established repertoire, ... or schemas that have become

canonical by repetition' (AAVV: 2016-17)². In addition, 'in the theatrical vocabulary, a common understanding of figure would relate to the construction of the theatrical character' (*idem*). In both senses, the rendering of a visible figure into a recognizable and archetypal one would refer to a process of figuration. What

¹ 'The figure thus represents neither the hypostasis nor the dissolution but a new status of the dramatic character: incomplete and discordant character who calls on the spectator to take shape; the character to build.' [my translation.]

² From February 2016 to March 2017 La Manufacture, a research department from Haute École Spécialisée de Suisse occidentale (HES.SO), in Lausanne, organized a research project entitled *Le Travail de la figure: que donne à voir une danse?*, with a team composed of Loïc Touzé, Mathieu Bouvier, Rémi Héritier, Alice Godfroy, Anne Lenglet, and invited researchers. For detailed information, consult: <http://www.manufacture.ch/fr/1895/Figure>. The research outcome was published in as Bouvier, Mathieu (2017) (Ed.), *Pour un atlas des figures* in <http://www.pourunatlasdesfigures.net/atlas>.

emerges in Marlene's work is precisely an inverse and much deeper concept of figure, one closely attached to 'a notion of figural work, a process that disengages the corporal figures from any figurative work, mobilizing the forces of disfigurement and transfiguration, inherent of the imaginary', and the unconscious, 'as faculties not of forming images, but of distorting them' (*idem*).

In his foundational study *Figura* (1938),³ Erich Auerbach unravelled the philological evolution of the

³ *Figura* was first published in *Archivum Romanicum* 22 (1938): 436–89 and then reissued in 1939 by Leo S. Olschki in Florence as a self-standing offprint. It was reprinted in Erich Auerbach, *Neue Dantestudien* (Istanbul, 1944), pp. 11–71 and again in his *Gesammelte Aufsätze zur romanischen Philologie* (Berlin, 1967), pp. 55–92. The first English translation was by Ralph Manheim in Auerbach, *Scenes from the Drama of European Literature: Six Essays* (New York, 1959), pp. 11–76. I will be citing from this 1959 English edition.

word *figura* from its origin until the Middle Ages, tracing its centrality for the Western history of representation. With the same etymological root as *ingere*, *figulus*, *factor* (sculptor, the one that gives shape and a figure to the thing), and *effigies* (imago, seal, emblem), *figura* originally meant "plastic form" (Auerbach: 1959, 11), but it was always associated with something livable, dynamic, and incomplete, a changing aspect that ran through the history of the concept, namely, through the works of Varro, Lucretio and Cicero. In fact, Greek vocabulary was much richer and had different terms for the concept of form, namely, '*morphe*, *eidos*, *schema*, *typos*, *plasis*,' and in the rhetorical and philosophical texts of Plato and Aristotle 'a clear dividing line was drawn particularly between *morphe* and *eidos* on the one hand, and *schema* on the other: *morphe* and *eidos* were the form or idea which "informs" matter;

⁴ The words *morphe* and *eidos* were generally translated in Latin as *forma*, close to the idea of the model; and *figura* was a common translation of the word *schema*, a Greek term widely used in rhetoric, mathematics, geometry, grammar and logic.

schema was the purely perceptual shape' (14).⁴ According to Auerbach, *figura* nonetheless kept its original plastic signification, since '*typos*, "imprint", and *plasis*, *plasma*, "plastic form" were often rendered by *figura*', developing from '*typos* the use of *figura* as "imprint of the seal,' (15), as a seal stamped in wax. Furthermore, *figura* expanded also into notions of 'statue', 'image', 'portrait', 'to impinge on the domain of *statua*, and even of *imago*, *effigies*, *species*, *simulacrum*' (*idem*).

In addition, in his ground breaking work *De Rerum Natura, On the Nature of Things* (first century BC), the roman poet and philosopher 'Lucretius uses *figura* in the Greek philosophical sense' (16), as notes Auerbach, but in a freer and more significant way, transposing the term 'from the plastic to the auditory sphere', as figures of speech, to the 'transition from the form to its imitation, from model to copy, ... where form and imago are too solidly anchored in one or the other of the two meanings' (*idem*). Further on, 'it is in Lucretius where first *figura* is employed in the sense of "dream-image", ... "ghost"' (17). And professing 'the cosmogony of Democritus and Epicurus,

⁵ '... numerous atoms are in constant motion; they move about in the void, combine and repel one another: a dance of figures,' (Auerbach: 1959, 17).

according to which the world is built up with atoms', the philosopher sometimes calls '*figurae*' to these atoms that in permanent motion give form to the cosmos.⁵

Ovid's *Metamorphosis*, an extremely influential work for Marlene, was also a significant contribution to the notion of *figura* as 'changing form' (21), in the sense of 'imprint of the seal' in wax (22), and as 'mobile, changeable, multiform, and deceptive' (23).

The Middle Ages and the Renaissance, according to the German philologist, still attach a great deal of importance to the art of figures of speech. But later on, behind pagan antiquity, the Christian Fathers

gave an extremely relevant contribution to the ambivalence of the concept of figure, by interpreting the events of the Old Testament as prophetic prefigurations of the New Testament. In this figural reading, the *figura* of the Old Testament corresponded to *umbra* or *imago*, ‘in the sense of “deeper meaning in reference of future things” to come, and the New Testament was called ‘*veritas*’ (35-36). *Figura*, then ‘appears also as an idol, as dream figure or as a vision’, but ‘by far the most often, it appears as prefiguration’ (*idem*), both spiritual and carnal.⁶ The term *figura*, then, acquired a theological, rhetorical and hermeneutical relevance, producing an alliance between spirituality and reality, where indeterminacy and openness were constitutive of the term’s richness and complexity.⁷

⁶ The figural interpretation of history by the Christian Fathers, from Tertulian to Augustine, was then used as a mission from the 4th century on, combining the concrete and plastic meaning of *figura* as form with a more abstract meaning of a ‘rhetorical image that conceals, transforms, and even deceives’ (Auerbach: 1959, 35).

⁷ Further on, the concept of *figura* also acquired a temporal and premonitory condition, and figural interpretation, or a figural view of history, became widespread up to the Middle Ages with a mixture of spirituality and a sense of reality. It proceeded through the first modernity of the XV-XVII centuries, with dislocations of senses in a semantic development that grounded some of structures that would be effective for many centuries and in different fields of knowledge.

The relevance of observing the mutations of the concept of figure is noteworthy not only because of the new icono-textual genres that appear, but also because of a more deeply new way of thinking, resulting from a refunding of figurative thought in terms of a humanist symbolism, which has pervaded all areas of European culture. As in Ovid’s *Metamorphosis*, figure embodies this possibility of permanent change, while remaining the same, as the wax material that can be molded into different figures but keeps its materiality. Marlene Monteiro Freitas has often referred to how she is interested in the possibility of being other(s), while at the same time remaining the same.

Dance is, in fact, a field of potentiality for witnessing the singular work of figures in movement, either in the configuration of choreographies or in the transfiguring processes of metamorphoses of gestures and bodies, which have a virtual quality beyond the limited contour of an image. So, the figural work of dance exceeds the figurative tool, and extends towards the potentiality of a force to be transmitted through the unstable figurability of a body in movement.⁸

⁸ In the context of a research project by Manufacture, Lausanne (HES.SO) entitled *Le travail de la figure: que donne à voir une danse?* (2016-17), the project directors have expressed: ‘Ainsi, loin de désigner un quelconque type chorégraphique, le mot de figure indique pour nous l’épiphanie sensible ou la voyance qui, au spectacle du geste, fait surrection dans le corps et effraction dans la forme, y réveille des survivances et des mémoires, anime l’œil d’étranges excès de vision: une image virtuelle dans le mouvement, un rythme dans l’image, une force dans la forme, une dissemblance dans la ressemblance, lapsus visuel ou mirage sensible.’ (Bouvier: 2017).

This potentiality inherent in the figure, expressed by its ambivalence between realness and abstraction, spirituality and concreteness, *imago* and metamorphosis, simulacrum and embodiment, or the representation of the unrepresentable, has rendered the figure a prominent visual and material tool for choreography. In the wake of Freudian metapsychology authors like Aby Warburg, Didi-Huberman, Louis Marin, Hubert Damish ou Marie-José Mondzain, further developed the dislocations of the concept of *figura* by the Christian iconography demonstrated by Auerbach, and how its ‘tropes and ambivalences were comparable to one of Freud’s dream-work processes (*Rücksicht auf Darstellbarkeit*), or considerations of representability, or of figurability’ (Bouvier: 2017). To this ‘Freudian revolution is attached what is sometimes mentioned as *figural turn*’ (Dumora: 2017, 13).

In the philosophical field, the concept of the *figural* coined by Jean-François Lyotard in his work *Discours, Figure* (1971) relates to those forces that make up unconscious operations, ‘including

condensation, displacement, second elaboration and all the drives that are part of the “libidinal economy”— a title, precisely, of another Lyotard’s essay (1974)’ (Dumora: 2017, *idem*).

Gilles Deleuze, in his work *Logique de la sensation* (1981), in order to analyse the painting of Francis Bacon, adopts the concept of *figural*, which he opposes to the figurative and to representation. Remaining a pregnant field of indiscernibility, for Deleuze, the *figure* permits a sense beyond logical and rational signification, one that follows the forces of unconscious drives (Deleuze: 2017, 61).

If Lyotard analysed Cézanne’s and Klee’s painting to ‘faire voir que voir est une danse’, ‘dance will probably be the privileged art form where to analyse the *visions of excess* [Bataille] that reside where the eye sees itself seeing’ (Bouvier: 2017).

Guintche – or the incoherence of all matter

Guintche (2010), the first renown solo work by Marlene Monteiro Freitas, departs from the experience of a jazz concert by Archie Shepp, followed by the need to draw this experience, and then to endow the drawn figures with life. This methodological gesture allows for some questions. Firstly, how to draw the contours of an experience? Secondly, how liveable, changeable and animated can the contours of those figures become? Thirdly, how to translate and transform (in the sense of metamorphosis) a drawing into a dance?

According to Marlene, a drawing can be alive, allowing for transformation by the single action of erasing the mouth, or redrawing the eyes differently. Thus, a face can easily acquire a different appearance, intensity or force, and this potentiality for metamorphosis is transposed from the drawing to the dance figure. What do drawings want, then? Or, as would W. J. T. Mitchell asks in his homonymous book, *What do pictures want?*

The animism of a drawing

Departing from the wish to animate a drawing, or the belief in the liveable power and intensity of this register, Marlene crosses the thin modern divide of animism. ‘The idea that pictures want something’, refers Michael Taussig, ‘evokes the belief that pictures are spirits’, and the ‘colonial response’ as we know it, ‘was to be suspicious of such a claim’ (Taussig, 2009: 263), regarded as an animist superstition held by others, but not by the Western moderns. In his book that proposes pictures to be alive, W. J. T. Mitchell advances the concept of the ‘metapicture’, as ‘a figure that helps to explain the often-observed uncanniness of images, their ghostliness or spectrality, their tendency to look back at the beholder, or seemingly (...) to “want something” from the beholder.’ (Mitchell: 2006). ‘To properly understand images’, Mitchell continues, one would need to return to ‘vitalism and animism’, not in the sense of a regression to a primitive thought, but ‘(as Levi-Strauss so often insisted) a taking account of the persistence of the “savage mind” at the dialectical heart of whatever we mean by the modern.’ (Mitchell: *idem*).

For the moderns, animism was the confluence and mixture of all the differences they had established — namely, the dissolution between subject and object — resulting in images of strangeness and

fantasy which called into question the control that the Cartesian subject had over the representation of reality, causing anxiety and, ultimately, the loss and destruction of that same Cartesian subject and his superiority over nature and all other reified (colonized) subjects. Anselm Franke has traced a brilliant diagnosis of animism as a ‘ghost that haunts modernity’, together with all the other negatives, such as the imaginary, the unconscious, and all otherness that existed on the other side of the Great Modern Divides. The task, the curator underlines, will be to bring these negatives back into history as the only way to ‘account for the relational constitution of the present’ (Franke, 2012).

To embark upon this task is thus to understand these [negatives] are never given “universals” of the modern, but its very relational products. They are the sites that modern history is silent about, to the extent that the very narrative of the “the modern” is built upon this silence as its fundament. The narrative-imaginary vacuum of the present is the direct outcome of this silence. This silence tells us that it is actually not animism, but modernity that is the ghost – halfway between presence and absence, life and death. And the future grand narratives of modernity may well speak of this ghost from the perspective of its other, from its “animist” side. (Franke, *idem*).

In her choreographies, Marlene traverses back and forth all those modern divides, not only by conveying unconscious and dream-work processes as choreographic tools, but also by evoking a wide range of those negative beyond modern Western positivity.

Coming back to *Guintche*, it can take several forms: from the concert to a drawing, then a dance that is also a circus show, a metamorphic wax figure. However, as Marlene notes, between all these there is no resemblance, only the same intensity, the same nature (Freitas, 2013). As a word in Cape Verdean creole, *Guintche* has several meanings: a bird that builds his nest with whatever he finds in his surroundings, a prostitute, a woman or a man that has several partners, or it can also generally refer to someone who lives his/her life making neither logical nor coherent choices.

Guintche, the dance, is indeed the embodiment of incoherent oppositions and immeasurable excesses. Propelled by an exultant force, Marlene embodies the potentiality of simultaneous contradictions, the fury and strangeness that challenge not only the duration of her movement, but also a rational comprehension of the *Guintche* figure.

Her body is divided into two: the lower limbs rooted in the ground follow the repetitive mechanics of her hip movement, with a movement and rhythm reminiscent of Cape Verdean dances. The upper limbs and face express a kaleidoscopic array of modes and states, as a drawing that is permanently redrawn, recalling bird-like gestures, animalist and clownish postures, relating fear to parody, irony to indifference, excitement to sadness, cannibalism to eroticism. Marlene’s face expression gains prominence in her eyes, the proper locus of the subject’s identification, and the mouth, one of the most symbolic body openings. Thus, these polymorphic distortions aim at disorganizing the stability of this figure, a figure that traverses and transfigures some of the modern divides, such as human versus puppet, human versus non-human animal, rationality versus animism.

Circus music with drums sets the tone, and the piece unfolds in two parts: in the first, longer, Marlene dwells in this indomitable split movement; in the second part, with a slower pace, Marlene starts

wandering through space, in what could be related to circus entertainment scenes. With clumsiness, mechanical-puppet-like movements or virtuosic gymnastics, Marlene embodies transitional and contrasting figures that combine delusion and hopefulness, comic and sadness, indifference and fragility, always unfinished, incoherent, initiating a path that ends up leading nowhere.

“This wax figure”, Marlene adds, “melts, solidifies, hides, changes form (...) and the sequence of transformations produces distinct images: circus, cannibalism, ectoplasm, rituals, gymnastic, puppets” (Freitas, 2013). However, *Guintche* always keeps its matter, which lies in its imponderability and counter-intuitive structure.

An atlas of eclectic references informed *Guintche*, namely, Goya’s drawings, *The Character Heads* by Franz Xaver Messerschmidt, regarding the face disfigurement, the film *Les maîtres fous* by Jean Rouch, regarding the intensity of the trance performance, among others.

The documentary *The Statues also die* (1953), by Chris Marker and Alain Renais, which traces not only the uprooting of African art by the colonial power, but also its annihilation from liveable symbols within a culture of objects deprived of life in Western context of museology and consumption, is a general reference in Marlene’s work. Within the colonial power, the film narrator mentions, the figure of the black slave progressively acquired other roles: “the black-puppet” for entertainment, and in modern Western context, “the black-sportsman” or the “black-boxeur”. In the bareness of *Guintche*’s blue scenario, one notices a punching bag hanging from the ceiling — a possible reference, not directly to Cape Verde’s heritage as a former Portuguese colony, but probably, or from the eye of the beholder, as a symbol of strength and struggle: a boxing bag and a figure of permanent incoherence which, haunting the Western theatrical apparatus, return the gaze to the (European) spectator.



Figure 1

Figure 1. *Guintche*. © Laurent Paillier (courtesy of the artist)



Figure 2



Figure 3

Figure 2. *Paraíso – coleção privada.* © Hervé Véronèse. (courtesy of the artist)

Figure 3. *de marfim e carne – as estátuas também sofrem.* © Hervé Véronèse. (courtesy of the artist)



Figure 4



Figure 5

Figure 4. *Jaguar*. © Hervé Véronèse. (courtesy of the artist)

Figure 5. *Bacantes – Prelúdio para uma purga*. © Filipe Ferreira. (courtesy of the artist)

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*AAVV (2016-17). *Figure. Le travail de figure: que donne à voir une danse.* La Manufacture.

In <http://www.manufacture.ch/download/docs/ugcwr4g5.pdf/Figure%20-%20Le%20projet.pdf>. (consulted 25/08/19).

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DISFIGURING FIGURES
THE POLITICAL POTENTIALITY OF MARLENE MONTEIRO FREITAS'S CHOREOGRAPHIC WORK

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