

DESIGNING SOCIAL SPACE THROUGH PERFORMANCE: AN EXPERIENCE OF SOCIAL PERFORMANCE IN A POST- INDUSTRIAL LANDSCAPE

JORGE PALINHOS

Introduction

Between 2016 and 2018 the international performance project “Reclaim the Future: Nomadic Carnival for change” took place in different parts of northern Europe. The project was a partnership between Teatermaskinen, from northern Sweden, Dirty Deal Teatro, from Latvia, Rural Nations, from Northern Scotland, Compagnie des Mers du Nord, from Northern France, and Visões Úteis, from Northern Portugal.

This artistic project aimed to explore the potential of the European periphery to demand substantial change from the centre of power. The artistic entities proposed to activate local communities, triggering their abilities to imagine their own futures, by providing to the communities artistic and conceptual tools, that allowed them to better express their aspirations and demands in a way to make them visible not only to the authorities of their own countries but to European authorities.

The project was funded by the Creative Europe program, which allowed the companies to develop a series of local and international initiatives in all the areas, in a continuous process of artistic exchange and contamination, which ended up with an international parade at the heart of the European Union, in

Brussels, at the stairs of the European Parliament.

There were two interesting aspects in the project, which are the reason of my ongoing research on it. First, it aimed to develop a social practice, an ethical relationship between artists and communities, where communities were not used as outsourcing of authenticity, to evoke a criticism that Claire Bishop (2012, p.219) directs towards social practice, but in an attempt to find a means where the artists would provide communities the necessary tools for them to express their own authenticity and identity. Second, the project aimed at uniting the local and the international, by simultaneously working with local communities, but also attempting to find a common ground between them that allowed them to be an international force in the face of power. This, the articulation of the local and the international, is something that the European institutions have been trying to achieve for some decades, with widely different results.

While the project wasn't entirely successful in achieving these two aims, the attempt is thought-provoking enough, both in an artistic and political perspective, and some of the outcomes resulted in relevant attempts at the idea of designing a shared social space of community. The example I will address here, a carnival that happened in Porto, called "Parada Desatada", developed a dramaturgy of space, time and community that revealed a series of artistic tools to the communities, and how the dramaturgy of the parade, based on Medieval and Renaissance models can still be useful in an artistic and social context.

Art and politics on the Northern fringe

"Reclaim the Future – Nomadic Carnivals for Change" was the project of a series of European theatre companies to develop a project to promote increased social inclusion and the application of arts as a force of social change. The leading company, Theatermaskinen, was also interested in exploring the idea of the Carnival as an ancient disruptive instance of the established social rules. The Carnival, for Theatermaskinen, could still be a powerful mode of expressing the wish for social change. The Carnival, has the theatre of the street, the display of

the grotesque, where laughter and excess replace official protocol, according to Bakhtin (Elliot, 1999, p.129) the symbolism of unity, freedom and inclusion of the other. At the time of the project, Theatermaskinen was exploring the technique of the bouffon, and had become fascinated by this figure of medieval theatre expressing the irrational, the grotesque, the unconscious experience of the world, but also the late medieval idea of the inverted world, where the fringes and the outcasts become the centre of society, allowed to question the established order, as it had been explored by Dario Fo, among others, and allowing the invisible, the nonconformed, to be presented and seen.

Therefore, the proposed carnival, in the form of a parade, attempted to use the classical artistic performative shape of the outcast, of the monster, to challenge the respectability of institutional, technocratic power, and bring the marginalized communities of northern Europe to present themselves in front of the seat of political power, in a display of their own nonconformed power. Through this, they hoped to activate the power of communities and allow them to reflect on their own identities, ambitions and possibilities.

This was the underlying concept of Reclaim the Future, with the Nomadic carnival becoming a symbol and hypothesis of this shared European carnival of the future, where all the different identities could find a equalitarian space of expression, joy of the carnival, hope of the future, and pride in their own specificities.

Theatermaskinen is a Swedish company based on the wooded areas of Ridrarhyttan, an old mining region, which was joined by Visões Úteis, a Portuguese company based in Porto, a post-industrial town, Rural Nations, a Scottish multiarts platform, based in Stornoway, in the Outer Hebrides, Dirty Deal Teatro, an independent theatre company in Riga, Latvia, an old Soviet country undergoing a capitalistic and western transformation, and Compagnie des Mers du Nord, a French theatre company based in Dunkirk, an old area of heavy industry. The concept was that each company would work with their local communities to develop several projects that would later be joined.

The project took place between June 2017 and June 2018, dates selected to happen during the solstice, an astronomical and ancient symbol and time of mystical transformation, where ancient religions would enact parades dedicated to the pagan gods.

Each partner was responsible for the local program, which usually entailed performances, conferences, workshops and other initiatives connected with the community. The focus would be a local parade joining the local people and collectives of each region.

The first phase of the project happened in Riddarhyttan, in Sweden, followed by Parada Desatada, em Campanhã, Porto, directed by Visões Úteis, and then in Riga, Latvia, the Outer Hebrides, Scotland, Dunkirk, in France, and finally in Brussels the final parade took place, with elements of all the other local parades slowly crossing the city centre until the stairs of the European Parliament, as a sign of the arrival of the fringe to the centre of European power, the local forces to the seat of the international forces, of those who live under circumstances they feel helpless to change, to those who have the power to change circumstances. For the aims of this paper, I will only focus on the local initiatives that happened in Porto, which I was able to follow closely.

This program entailed performances by Visões Úteis and Teatermaskinen, a project of social cartography, an experience of georeferencing in the old social housing area of São Vicente de Paulo, the documentary film *Reclaim the Future/ Exige o Futuro*, and the book *Ficou tudo ao deus-dará*, by Márcia Andrade, with memories of the old inhabitants of the razed Bairro de São Vicente de Paulo, as well as a workshop of Performance in Community.

The main event was Parada Desatada, the carnival built together with the community. This parade was the initiative and conception of Visões Úteis, under the leadership of Inês de Carvalho, but involving a series of local authorities, art galleries, amateur artistic groups, ecology activists, dance studios, gym studios, elderly homes, etc., in a wide effort of mobilization.

The aim was to recruit these associations as being representative of local

populations, some of whom already trying to use artistic practices as a means of cultural and social development, others anchored in training, work or dynamizing projects for populations.

After identifying, contacting and establishing partnerships with these entities, several workshops were led by Inês de Carvalho and her collaborators. The main concept of these workshops was “lines with which to sew a community”, and the objective was to identify and map the social and imaginary threads that could unite all these local entities in order to use them as the foundation of the Parade. One of these workshops was that of Fotos do Futuro, in which each participant was photographed with a slate where was written what the person hoped the future would bring.

However, in the process, it was found that despite the geographical and urban proximity, most of these entities maintained little contact and articulation with each other, functioning rather as autonomous universes, centred on their own close community and on the activities they developed. Thus, an important work, and possibly a very relevant result of this initiative, was the establishment of bridges of contact between some of the communities mentioned above, to develop future partnerships.

Another of the project's first workshops focused on exploring possibilities for the parade, meanwhile entitled “Parada Desatada”, to provide participants with both an idea of the carnival freedom that was sought, as well as opening the space to debate which invisible lines could unite the district. There was also a second workshop focused on conferring artistic skills to the different partners.

The central concept of the parade was the rejection of a hierarchical imposition in which the artists directed the non-artists, but providing each community with the possibility of developing their artistic autonomy, both by offering them artistic tools that they might not have, as well as the ability for them to decide what they intended to present within the global dramaturgy of the parade.

The third workshop, of internationalization, provided the various local entities with the possibilities to meet and interact with representatives of international

partners, in order to create links between different European peripheries and gaining a clearer awareness of the European dimension of the event, which was also one of the objectives of European support for this.

The fourth workshop was a buffoons' workshop, guided by Ana Azevedo. The buffoon's technique had been chosen to be a common link of all parades, not only because of the buffoon's association with the carnival, but also because it represented the subversion of the Apollonian social order, and the freedom of human drives against social and political conventions.

The Parada Desatada Carnival

The parade took place on July 15, 2017. It started at 5 pm in the demolished Bairro de São Vicente de Paulo and took a little over 500 meters, crossing the entire Praça da Corujeira through the central garden and then turning to Rua de São Roque da Lameira, where traffic was stopped to allow the procession to enter the precinct of the former and downtrodden Industrial Slaughterhouse of Porto.

I mentioned earlier that one of the principles of the intervention was to allow collectives to choose what they would do during the parade, but there was a dramaturgy of the space of the parade itself.

In the demolished Bairro de São Vicente de Paulo, there were several QR codes scattered throughout the space, which allowed listening to memories of former inhabitants, but also possible futures for that space, imagined by the children of the Elementary School of Corujeira. There were sticks with white flags painted with symbols and messages from each group participating in the parade, as a sign of the presence of these groups, which would function as a spatial aggregation device to start the parade. This was a way of introducing a temporal three-dimensionality in the carnival, making it not only move through space, but also through the time layers inherent to the place. The parade started with the movement of the backhoe and the buffoons, and with a lyrical singer singing on top of the backhoe. The group of buffoons, led by Ana Azevedo,

then led the audience in a procession to Praça da Corujeira, accompanied by a percussion group, Batucada Radical. The group of buffoons thus functioned as an element of aesthetic continuity through the various stages along the way, just as they functioned as a link between the various international phases of Reclaim the Future. This was followed by an amateur theater play, composed of scenes from the play “Conversas à Janela”, by the local group “Rugas de Expressão”, evocative of several episodes from the past of the parish. This took place in the windows of the neighborhood itself, decorated with paper flowers.

Praça da Corujeira, the central meeting place for the parish of Campanhã and the old cattle fair, revealed the historic position of the area as an interface between the city of Porto and its surrounding countryside.

This was followed by a show of young urban dances, by the MK group, of the Associação Cultural e Recreativas Malmequeres da Nôeda, and then the performance Fado do Futuro, with the seamstress and fado singer Amélia, followed by the “Hino dos Ciganos”, with a presentation of Gypsy music and dance by a part of the numerous local Roma community.

From here, several local music groups accompanied people who carried messages for the future, on the way to the Slaughterhouse.

The Industrial Slaughterhouse, as an evolution and complement of the cattle market, was a space that revealed the past of the parish as a place of industry, meanwhile extinguished, and is the place that the Porto City Council intends to transform into the developmental backbone of Campanhã, through a new architectural project, by Kengo Kuma, dedicated to art and new media. That is, a space for the future.

Here there was a ritual of opening the slaughterhouse gates by the company Era uma Vez Teatro, composed by performers with cerebral palsy. This performative ritual, inspired by the aesthetics of Mad Max films, forced the interruption of the road traffic to allow the gates to be opened and the parade to enter the courtyard of the slaughterhouse.

At the courtyard, messages for the future were tied to the pigeons of the Associação

Columbófila Invicta, before they were released and there was a toast to the future, with fortune cookies and glasses with the words “the future” containing a drink called Pirolito: a non-alcoholic soft drink very popular in Portugal in the middle of the 20th century, which was reimagined for the occasion.

In the courtyard, the atmosphere of a folk celebration had been created, with popular food and drink that invited the audience to remain, in what would be a real and replicant practice of social interaction.

The Dramaturgy of Past and Future

Objectively, Parada Desatada results from a combination of dramaturgical thinking that seeks to reflect the variety of a particular community in a time horizon, from the memory of its eldest inhabitants to the expectations of the youngest. Such concept was translated into a space-time path that sought not only to articulate these sensibilities but also to integrate the community’s own contributions. In this way, both theatrical and musical performances depended on the self-representation awareness of the communities involved, as the texts that viewers could read or hear were the real testimonies of the locals interviewed. In this way, the intervention did not seek to impose an artistic aesthetic external to the community, but rather to endow it with tools and means for it to seek its own form of representation. Further, the dramaturgical structure of Parada presupposes the identity of a community as being defined by anchoring to a place, the parish of Campanhá, regardless of ethnicity or ethnic group, and by temporal persistence: what united people was a shared memory and a communal hope for the future, a future that is also anchored geographically in the territory of the parish.

Through its choice of integrating the contributions of the locals under a dramaturgical itinerary, Parada Desatada became an open-slot teleological performance, where *Visões Úteis* determined the overall direction of the parade, and the community collectives filled in the empty slots with their own self-representation. This open-slot dramaturgy was not imposed, but slowly built

considering the different spaces and collectives involved, as a sort of imaginary community (Hobsbawn and Ranger, 2012), but one framed in a model very similar to the Corpus Christi parades of the Middle Ages, where the different guilds and corporations would join in a festive parade to claim their rights and existence in front of the city authorities.

Remarkably, this community performance attempted to connect a shared, remembered past with the idea of a potential shared future through a sort of memory loci device, which Frances Yates described as being “established from places and images” (2014, pp.6-8), and Simon Critchley argues is defined by motion: “The brilliance of Hegel’s insight was not to reduce memory to a kind of dull recitation of the past, but to create something permanently moving. (...) Memory needs to be imagination. Transfiguration. (...) We are constituted through the vast movement of history, of which we are the largely quiescent effects. Sundry epiphenomena. Symptoms of a millennia-long malaise whose cause escapes us. Memory theater cannot be reduced to my memory, but has to reach down into the deep immemorial strata that contain the latent collective energy of the past!” (2014, pp.80-81).

The positioning of QR Codes, the images, the recovering of the historical memory of places, the use of posters with sentences and wishes built a real memory loci in a real space. And by the use of the parade movement, the conscious re-enactment and addressing of the collective memory, the parade attempted, dramaturgically, to also build an image of the future. This became clear at the entrance of the slaughterhouse, with the juxtaposition of images of future (real or fictional), with the sounds and flavours of the past, creating a blending of urban memories, and giving credence to Critchley’s argument: “And implicitly that story becomes one about the future as well. The city is a spatial network of memory traces, but also a vast predictive machine” (2014, p.38).

Conclusions

Reclaim the Future was an utopian international artistic project that attempted to blend the local and the European, the fringes and the centre. It raised a series of interesting questions regarding the role of social practice, the international and regional dimensions of artists, and the possibility of enacting social change through art.

Parada Desatada was just one element of the overall project but it brings a series of relevant evidence in the intersection of urban space, time, community and dramaturgy. The performance tried to create a bridge between the artists' roles and the community roles, by giving the first the tasks of mediation, empowerment, production and dramaturgy, and allowing the second to find their own ways of self-representation and togetherness.

By reviving the old religious form of the Carnival, the Parada created the dramaturgical possibility of an equalitarian performance, where no one is just a spectator or a performer, but everyone is simultaneously spectator, performer and community. This also creates equality between the different professional and non-professional performers, independently of their skills, social status and recognition.

Creating a dramaturgy open to the input of communities, activated by the workshops and with an extended social practice of artistic connection with communities, the parade activated the self-consciousness of the community collectives as actors of the urban space.

Further, this dramaturgy drawn the use of urban space, personal and collective memories, scenographic elements and dramaturgical events that activated the shared urban memories of the district, both personal and communal. Through it, the parade became like a sort of memory loci, a collective memory loci, which was put in motion by the movement of the parade, in a sort of metaphorical journey through memory towards a possibility of the future.

Through its combination of memory images, motion and space, Parada Desatada is a clear example of both a non-hierarchical site-specific performance that both

evokes elements of the ancient history of performance and ritual, but also past artistic and intellectual practices that can be inspirations for future artistic and research opportunities.

This work was funded by national funds through FCT - Fundação para a Ciência e a Tecnologia, I.P., within the project UIDB/04041/2020.

References

- BISHOP, Clair (2012). *Artificial Hells – Participatory Art and the Politics of Spectatorship*. London: Verso.
- CAPANI, Elton & CAPANI, Entuela H. (s/d). *Reclaim the Future*. (Documentary) – <https://vimeo.com/308821945> (Access on May 10, 2020).
- CRITCHLEY, Simon (2014). *Memory Theatre*. New York: Other Press.
- ELLIOT, Shanti (1999). “Carnival and Dialogue in Bakhtin’s Poetics of Folklore” in *Folklore Forum*. N. 30, vol 1-2. Bloomington: Trickster Press.
- HOBSBAWN, Eric & RANGER, Terence (ed.) (2012). *The Invention of Tradition*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- RECLAIM THE FUTURE – <http://www.reclaimthefuture.org/> (Access on May 8, 2020).
- SANTOS, Nuno; ALLEN, Sara & ALLEN, Alexandra (2017). *Exige o Futuro / Reclaim the Future*. - <https://vimeo.com/264895491> (Access May 10, 2020).
- VISÓES ÚTEIS – *Exige o Futuro* – <http://visoesuteis.pt/pt/criacoes/item/1922-exige-o-futuro-/reclaim-the-future> (Access May 10, 2020).
- YATES, Frances (2014). *The Art of Memory*. London: Bodleyhead.