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The Ground of the Cities – performance as catalysis

Andrea Maciel

The Ground of the Cities – performance as catalysis

ABSTRACT

The Ground of the Cities is a performance that incorporates public space dynamics and acts in the fine line between life and performativity. It looks at the vulnerability of homeless people in the everyday life of contemporary cities in Brazil. Using *The Ground of the Cities* as a case study, this article considers how urban interventions may be understood as catalysis that expose the injustices embedded in a city's social tissue. I propose that the practice-based investigation of public spaces through performance can engender new narratives in which the everyday conflicts of the city are re-written in an expanded participatory political dimension.

Keywords: Public space, Performance, Homelessness, Catalysis, Urban Intervention

[...] not what moves, but what makes you move. (Baush:1987)

More than 300,000 people in Britain – equivalent to one in every 200 – are officially recorded as homeless or living in inadequate homes, according to figures released by the charity Shelter¹. Many cities amongst OECD countries including Copenhagen, Paris, Dublin, Rome and in the United Kingdom have experienced a sharp increase in people living outdoors in the last ten years thanks to rising housing prices amid a recovering economy. According to IBGE², in Rio de Janeiro, my birth town, the homeless population has increased 150 percent in the last three years. The driving factors have been fallout from Brazil's worst recession in decades and long-standing economic inequalities.

Homelessness is both a crisis for individuals living without a home, and a reflection of the local, national and global housing crises in the cities where homeless populations are rising. Zygmunt Bauman (2000) has pointed out that homeless people are seen as the new 'useless of the world' (2000, 38). In this context, as homelessness increases, the most prominent cities in the world become visibly inhabited by

¹ Shelter UK, 2017. "More than 300.000 people in Britain homeless today" . https://england.shelter.org.uk/media/press_releases/articles/more_than_300,000_people_in_britain_homeless_today November, 2017. Accessed October, 2018. [Google Scholar]

² Brazilian Institute of Geography and Statistics, 2017. "IBGE releases population estimative" July, 2018. Accessed October, 2018. <https://agenciadenoticias.ibge.gov.br/en/agencia-press-room/2185-news-agency/releases-en/22385-ibge-releases-population-estimates-of-municipalities-for-2018>

outsiders of a social order that defines 'home' as a financial investment unit, rather than a universal right. The visibility of homelessness brings into question the social relations that structure the fragile balance of human coexistence. Castel (1988, 57) draws attention to the total divorce between the legal-political order, founded on the recognition of the rights of citizens, and the economic order that entails misery and a mass demoralization. The vulnerability of social ties and the absence of the guarantees of social rights for a large contingent of the population thus represent some of the most urgent and complex contemporary problems in an era of neoliberalism.

In the midst of these problems, in our daily routes across the cities most affected by social crises derived from the neoliberal order, anyone can see beggars; people with mental health issues; men, women, and children thrown on the ground under the indifferent gaze of other city dwellers. In my native Brazil, this reality is particularly acute. Passers-by have become accustomed to sharing the sidewalks with thousands of street dwellers.

These bodies, literally lying at the feet of a society that moves past them in pursuit of profit, defy a sense of social stability. Their presence evokes feelings of discomfort in those who allow themselves to really look at the fallen bodies. Hence a certain kind of wilful blindness emerges as the potential for discomfort morphs into an attitude of indifference.

It was precisely the indifference to these excluded bodies that spurred me to create the performance *The Ground of the Cities* in 2005. My point of departure was the opposition between the verticality of productive urban life and the conditions of abandonment experienced by those who suffer under an economic order where upright citizens walk past 'useless' bodies on the ground. I was then faced with a great challenge: how to create visibility around these invisible bodies? How to invite passersby to be affected by them without having to make a verbal political statement? I have performed *The Ground of the Cities* from 2005 to 2016. Throughout this period the performance has been integrated into research groups, conferences and seminars and I have had the opportunity to collect data from dozens of experiences in a great variety of public spaces in countries including the US, England, Colombia and Brazil, where I have performed in five different states.

Provoked by the questions above, I chose to respond with my body. My performative answer was to embody a fall to the ground, and to put myself in the

place of homeless citizens. I could then act in the fine line between the performance proposition and the crucial conflicts of everyday life.

The choice of approaching a public space situation coming from an embodied experience rather than an analytical point of view of a distant observer gives to this work a phenomenological perspective. This approach not only encompasses embodied performance theory defined by Victor Turner as a body of knowledge derived by experience as it converses with ethnographic methodologies proposed by Richard Schechner in his book “Between Theatre and Anthropology” in which the object observed and the observer are in an intrinsic relationship.

In that sense I am bringing the object observed to be analyzed through an embodied experience considering that the sensorial realm and public affects that come from the experience elucidates and refine the perception of the performance in the cultural context of homeless in the cities I have chosen to perform.

The Ground of the Cities was named after many experiments in which I recognized that the place where the body falls is a powerful place from which to address the interactions between body, public space and the sense of vulnerability produced by the lack of economic protection. Whilst I was concretely experimenting with my body in spaces of great circulation in different cities around the world such as Rio de Janeiro, Bogota, London and New York, I was also bringing into discussion the reality of social exclusion experienced daily by thousands of street dwellers.

The first time I fell down to the ground of a big city I wanted to research first-hand the disconcerting sense of vulnerability of the bodies that surrender to gravity against the urgent daily march that characterises the productive life of a city. I fell down on Avenida Copacabana at Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, and someone leaned over me:

“You all right?”

“Yes, just trying the city from another angle.”

To my pleasant surprise, the undecipherable condition of my fallen body was able to shift both the gravitational centre of the gaze of passers-by and set in motion narratives that intervened in the creation of meaning about the vulnerability of the fallen person. On the countless times I fell to the ground in different cities in the world I would enter in my research journals how a falling body could be a catalyst to reveal aspects intrinsic to the local culture in which my body was interfering. It was

interesting to notice that in Angra dos Reis,³ a small Brazilian seaside town in which sexuality was a taboo, most of the reactions would include some sort of sexual projection towards the body on the ground, often in the form of harassment, or verbal attacks, while in cities like New York (US) or Bogota (Colombia) people would tend to associate the body on the ground with issues related to migration, military power and drug taking.

Those responses given by the passersby throughout spontaneous interaction with the falling body lead me to understand that the body on the ground in such specific performative context was a catalyst to reveal anthropological aspects of the local culture as well as it could bring to the surface subjective perceptions regards the vulnerability of the homeless people. The concept of performance-catalyses that will be further developed in this article came from those first embodied experiences and it is precisely related to the potential of producing an active change in the audience inviting them to step out of the passive role of a witness to assume a co-authorship in the process of creating meaning around the performance act. Meanwhile the role of the performer lying on the ground is about not acting, or producing any image but holding the space in order to bridge the catalytic responses caused by the impact generated by its gesture.

Throughout my experiences in the streets of many cities I realized that the unexpected does happen: “I should be at work by now. But I am not because you won’t get up. Get up woman,” shouted a middle-aged man dressed in a well-cut suit, “That’s ungodly. We don’t have the right to question the destiny of man.” “Don’t we?!” I responded. This reaction from a passerby after seeing my body lying down on the floor in front of a shopping centre in Rio de Janeiro prompted him to interrupt his daily routine to spend at least 10 minutes interacting with me.

There are countless other stories to tell: plenty of sexual harassment and religious responses; those who presumed the fallen body was linked to drug use, depression, anxiety and suicide attempts. And there were also aggressors, leering at a body that challenges the law of verticality with accusations of laziness, procrastination, prostitution or ill-intentioned loitering.

³ Angra dos Reis is a Brazilian municipality in southwest Rio de Janeiro state. It’s made up of 365 islands and a small port surrounded by steep, forested coastline. The city’s income derives from its port operations, a sizeable fishing industry, and the flow of weekend and holiday tourists drawn to nearby beaches and resorts.

I started by falling to the ground alone, but gradually sought other peers to join me. How many times have other bodies fallen with me, whether fearfully or fearlessly? Performance companions, students, partners, in that disconcerting surrendering to the pavements and to the movement of passers-by that renders us vulnerable in every way: physically as we are stepped over, or at risk of being kicked or beaten, and emotionally as the gaze of others betrays their disgust and embarrassment, piercing our souls and providing a constant reminder of our loss of dignity. By the very act of falling, we are at the mercy of those who are now above us and thus presume themselves superior in every way.

In the wake of many experiments, the qualities of the senses that stimulate the catalysing effect of the performance came to the fore as a consequence of many embodied research practices. We always mixed with people, and performed in areas with a large footfall. We fell one by one, at different times and away from each other to avoid being mistaken for a flash mob or street theatre. We never explained the reason for our falling; we avoided to do any action that could be identified with any type of plastic or choreographic representation, and let ourselves remain empty and flexible, leaving room for the manifestation of the other. Remaining empty so that the other might enter is to cultivate a sense of being connected to the present moment, and to embody the courage of vagabonds, feeling their way with every new step.

Urban crises were revealed through the falling, such as when we mixed with the beggars of Piedade-Barris Square, a place of urban violence in Salvador da Bahia, and were attacked by the same private security staff that beat up and mistreat the street-dwellers on a daily basis. On the day that we fell, by mere chance, the beggars were with us behind the cameras that we usually bring with us to register the performance, observing with detachment their own activity, which we had now experiencing in our bodies. My body had fallen at the foot of some stairs leading up to a street. Had it been the body of a street-dweller, it would certainly have become invisible to passers-by, but because it was the body of a white middle-class woman, the invisible social order became visible at many levels.

The fallen body and what is visible and invisible in the cities everyday life

The iteration of the performance described above took place in Salvador da Bahia at CORPOCIDADE, an international conference on performance and public space promoted by the Federal University of Bahia in Brazil and the Bauhaus-Universität

Weimar. The place where we performed was one of the most violent areas of Salvador also known as Praça da Piedade (Pieta Square) in the Barris Neighborhood. Historically the square was used as a stage for the execution of criminals and slaves.

When I arrived at 5:40am to make an assessment of the local conditions, I approached a group of homeless people who were still sleeping on the sidewalks. I was verbally attacked by a man named Lazarus who was threatening to throw a stone in my direction, because he was angry at having his privacy invaded. Two hours later I approached him again to ask for his help with the protection of the camera equipment during the performance. When he learned that our action was about emulating the behavior of the homeless on the streets in order to invite people to respond to it, he was absolutely amazed and rather touched. His participation in this performance was extremely complex as he initiated observing the actions behind the camera and progressively moved to be part of the performance set. He was known as a kind of leader in the area and throughout the four hours of performance he managed to encourage many other homeless city dwellers to join our group.

During the performance, passers-by who stopped, or were captured by the presence of the bodies on the ground, felt compelled to express their point of view. We heard sentences like: "Those are rich students passing as beggars in order to touch us. I want to see if they can put up with starvation! I know all about starvation, they don't". "No one knows what misery is, they don't have the right to question human destiny". Sentences like that would generate an immediate spontaneous debate about the future of young people, drugs and the economy.

When we moved to the coach station stairwell, there was an American professor in the group who fell on the bottom of the stairwell causing an uproar. One of the passers-by had an extreme reaction towards him: "Come out! For God's sake, man! This is not the place for you. What a disgrace!"

Professor David responded in an American accent: "... but I want to stay here ... let me stay here for a while."

The man was taken by extreme rage: "This can't be true! Get out of this floor for God's sake... have some dignity, man, get out of here. " When the Professor did not leave, the man grabbed his arm and pulled him up. But he released himself and returned to the ground.

Having a white, male, well-educated man at the bottom of a dirty stairwell had a major effect on the community of passersby. Their responses to the situation

revealed how, although people were able to accept many fallen bodies in their daily routine, when a representative of the white supremacy falls the whole social order appears threatened.

After the altercation between Professor David and the passers-by, security was called and a man without a uniform arrived, introducing himself as "the one in charge of the area". Performers made fun of his words, and the supposed officer became angry. He attacked, "Do you have authorization? On the contrary, get out of here. I'll have to remove you by force." I could have stopped him by showing the congress folder and explaining that it was one of the performances in the program, but facing such a fruitful conflict, I decided to hide the evidence in our favour and allowed the playful dynamic to continue.

The self-appointed security officer made it clear that if it wasn't for their clothes and the vocabulary they used to wards him, he would have physically attacked the group. It was evident that Lazarus and the group of homeless people following him were very uncomfortable with the situation. At the bottom of the stairs where the performers were, the atmosphere was different. The performers were making jokes and creating an animated, jocular and aggressive game of words that consisted of distorting the words used by the security officer using double meaning.

The performance created a temporary crisis amongst the users of the social space: public-space hierarchical roles were subverted and exposed through a dialectic perspective. At the top of the stairs was the leader of the local homeless population, on the bottom a leader of local private security, and in the middle, responsible for catalyzing the great upheaval was the American professor. It was unacceptable within that social context to see a body with elite features thrown onto a site of exclusion.

The police did not take long to arrive. When they approached I showed the congress folder and explained that this was a performance for the CORPOCIDADE conference authorized by the City Council and the tension was then dissipated. The security guy was obviously bewildered, while Lazarus and his companions revealed a certain pleasure through their facial expressions.

We returned together to Pieta Square, and along the way many street dwellers shared with us the suffering of their day-to-day lives and the violent abuses experienced at the hands of the men serving as an unofficial security force. It was these endless crimes, about which they normally kept silent, that were brought to the surface as a result of the performance.

Over the course of the day, our relationship with the homeless people had gone from one extreme to the other. At the end of the day we were a disparate group exchanging views and personal stories in the square. Their stories were intertwined with daily life events and situations that had happened earlier in the performance set. The theme of death was a very vivid and present issue in all the collective narratives. . In their reports on police violence they usually referred to themselves as heroes of a daily resistance.

Performance as catalysis

The Ground of the Cities can be understood as a performance-catalysis. The concept of performance-catalysis was first articulated by Adrian Piper⁴ in the 1970s when she created several interventions called *Catalysis Series*⁵ (1970-73) in which the participatory relation between the performer and public space was put into perspective. Catalytic performance prioritises the potentiality for inducing changes in its audience above aesthetic, stylistic, or even direct communicative concerns for inducing changes in its audience above aesthetic, stylistic, or even direct communicative concerns. Its value can be measured by what Adrian Piper describes as ‘the strength of the change, rather than whether the change accords positively or negatively with some aesthetic standard. (Piper 1996, 74)

Catalysis, from the Greek term: *katálŷsis*, which indicates dissolution, or *katalŷein* [to dissolve] from the prefix *kata-* "down" and *lyein* "to loosen". Since 1836 this word has had chemical connotations, when it was first used to indicate a vast rate of a chemical reaction. The chemical definition of catalysis points to an interesting perspective: ‘The catalysts act causing a new reaction path, or accelerating reactions with a minimum activation energy’.⁶ Piper’s *Catalysis Series* brought this chemical concept into a discussion of performance practice. She argues that a performance can be catalytic through juxtapositions of elements of extra-everyday life and conditioned behaviours, generating uncomfortable zones and a fresh look at the existing relationship between the body and the city. Piper’s legacy can be regarded as an important contribution to how to conceptualize ideas from one body of knowledge to another.

⁴ Adrian Margaret Smith Piper (b. 1948) was part of the first generation of conceptual artists. She gained a PhD in philosophy from Harvard University, taught at Michigan, Harvard, Stanford, and has always acted in a hybrid zone between artistic creation and academic research.

⁵ Piper evokedIn this set of seven performance works, she used her own actions as a catalyst to invoke immediate and often negative reactions from the unsuspecting audience.

In this particular performance practice, the catalysis metaphor is understood as an inter-textual, itinerant and fluid form. Catalysis is an agency that arises from a set of distinct factors: location, public vs. artistic bodies, time, context, the social agendas of the government, and political ideologies of the catalytic agent and the viewer witnessing the agent's actions.

The action itself, or the temporary change caused by the performer's action in the public space, may be diverse, such as the falling body of the American professor, or the temporary suspension of the security forces in the coach station area; in each case the intention is simply to see what will happen and to remain open to all possibilities and reactions from passers-by.

But how can this dynamic of openness and potentiality for action continue to be activated after the moment has gone? It seems to me that the essence of performance catalysis is about instilling in both audiences and performers an openness and willingness to observe; an ability to notice and absorb injustice, and then react by speaking out against the system, hopefully inspiring others to do the same. Likewise, the performance-catalysis helps reveal unspoken and often barely visible political forces and mechanisms of power intrinsic to the local organization of public space. In the performance example described above, when the mechanisms of power were exposed in an open arena, all the other vectors related to the homeless situation became equally visible: the segregations from public space, the diverse fears and the affective experience of oppression.

There are some specific elements that were included in my vision of creating a catalytic effect generally in The Ground of the Cities performance : 1- the **re-enactment** of a behaviour from an uncomfortable scene represented by the act of lying down on the ground, 2- the element of **strangeness** meaning that the body on the ground belonged to a privileged socio-economic class, 3- the **unknown** condition of the falling bodies by the passersby, and finally, 4- a **kinaesthetic empathy**, or a state of whole body listening from the performers. All those elements served to make the audience an active part of the performance.

As in a catalytic chemical reaction, all the participants or elements of this performance were the subject of several displacements or dissolutions: the security forces couldn't be as physically aggressive as they usually are; street dwellers that normally flee became the observers of their own conflict; we (performers) also could not devote ourselves exclusively to our usual dynamic of lying down on the floor and

letting people spontaneously respond to our action, since we had to engage in a interaction with the security forces.

Amongst all the suspended roles, the one that mobilized the most layers of meaning was the role of the homeless people. They were the ones who were able to see themselves from a detached point of view by being alongside with our re-enactment of their intricate everyday life conflicts. This perspective made them able to articulate critical insights into the harmful affects of their living conditions. Their existence, which is usually invisible and illegitimate to official power, was being discussed in a public arena and all the agents responsible for their regular oppression were being exposed.

The physical embodiment of the homeless people's situation from Pieta Square (Salvador) was a catalytic action that revealed unknown potentialities. We were able to see and make visible their deep level of vulnerability, but they were also shown to us as outsiders of a social order with very strong bonds to the territory of public space.

As part of the catalytic experience we were able to renew our views on the reality of homeless people, which continues to be relegated to a silent and obscure territory. Like the chemical reaction, performance-catalysis creates crisis in order to make visible what was previously invisible.

The polyphony of reactions coming from the spontaneous audience amplified historical wounds and conflicts in a very powerful way; the performers' bodies were catalysts serving to expiate the daily sorrows of marginal dwellers such as the daily verbal and physical aggression addressed to them by the security forces and public slave executions that were displayed at the Pieta Square 200 years ago. Public space performances has always confronted me with the question: "What moves me?" I move because I want to stand *in between* – the unavoidable space of performance – but above all to generate perceptions and affections in a world that is moving too fast to facilitate our active participation.

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