

ART AS AN AESTHETIC CRISIS

Lia Rodrigues

Today, when everyone speaks of the other and of otherness it is important to remember that words also have their other. There are other ways of looking at the same word. Take the word crisis.

I live in a place where crisis does not mean the same thing as it means here in Europe. It's the same word but it's not the same crisis. I can say that in Brazil we live in a permanent state of crisis. One crisis after the other; or many different kinds of crisis at the same time. And crisis in the countries of the South has always meant work. We live and feed on it. And it is neither provisional nor transitory but a condition of existence. To be in crisis is to be in a state of vulnerability.

And in places where the crisis is a permanent state we learn that vulnerability is not a synonym of fragility. Vulnerability is a condition that promotes the creation of life, of relationships, of architectures. We are immersed in all its dimensions: political, social, personal, and obviously artistic. And because vulnerability is a way of living, it teaches us specific skills. Experiences and knowledge are born from this state.

Social relations in Brazil are marked by the systematic use of violence. And violence doesn't only operate in the soul, but also in blood and muscles, as Frantz Fanon wrote.

Brazil has the largest absolute number of homicides in the world, with more than sixty thousand homicides a year. Every eight minutes one person is killed in Brazil. Of every one hundred people murdered in Brazil, seventy-one are black.

Among them, the largest number are black, young, and poor. Every year, around twenty-three thousand young black men between the ages of fifteen and twenty-nine are killed. Every twenty-three minutes a young black man is murdered in Brazil. To give you an example, it is as if every year more than 150 airplanes carrying young blacks crash, with no survivors. Genocide of the black population is the expression that best fits the current reality of Brazil.

Living in a country as unequal as Brazil raises questions. Is it possible to approach the other, this other, who is so distant from us but lives in the same city? How do we cross borders and create common ground? How can contemporary art work against these flagrant inequalities?

During my professional life, working in times of crisis and vulnerability was the norm, not the exception. As an artist I tried to respond in different ways, with propositions, initiatives, and actions.

I am a choreographer and started my professional life as a dancer in São Paulo in the seventies. In the eighties I worked with Maguy Marin in France. Back in Brazil, I created my dance company in 1990. In 1992 I founded the Panorama Dance Festival and was the director for 14 years.

Since 2003 I have been developing different projects in the *favela* of Maré, in Rio de Janeiro, together with the NGO Redes da Maré. This *favela*, with 140,000 inhabitants, is one of Rio's largest *favelas*. Located between the international airport and the city centre, it occupies a symbolic and strategic area of the city.

Maré has a high density of population and is bigger than 80 percent of Brazilian cities, but like all the *favelas* it suffers from a lack of investment in health, education, security, sanitation, and infrastructure; and is marked by borders created by the violence of armed criminal groups, limiting the circulation within the *favela* and relations with the outside.

Most *favelas* can't be found on the maps of the city. They are still seen as empty and precarious spaces, at the margins of society. These areas – notorious for their violence and extremely dangerous – are kept out of the way. This strategy of invisibility and emptiness finds echo in the perception of what a *favela* is. The inhabitants of the *favelas* are widely perceived as potential criminals or passive victims, and violence is the dimension to which these popular spaces are constantly being reduced.

But the *favela* is not just a place of violence and poverty; it is also a vibrant place, with a strong tradition of activism and self-organisation, rich in popular events. From January to March 2017, thirteen children and adults were killed in the *favela* of Maré. This violence hit education and health: children spent many days without classes and residents had no access to medical posts. These numbers are only an example of a reality that is repeated in other *favelas* in Rio. To give you an idea: during one of our performances someone was killed in front of our space; we are used to working with the sound of machine guns and bullets; children in the school often have to lay down on the floor to hide from stray bullets that wound and kill.

Last March more than five thousand people took to the streets of Maré to protest against violence and in favour of peace. This protest was an invitation to make people more aware of what was happening. There is a need for change.

The fact that my dance company is working daily in Maré changes and contaminates what we create. The place where we are is inscribed in our body and in the way we move. It is a convergence full of different intensities, failures, and victories.

AKADEMIE DER KÜNSTE

In 2008 I found a large warehouse that had been abandoned for twenty years. This warehouse became the Centro de Artes da Maré, the first cultural centre in this *favela*. The place was in a very bad condition and together with Redes we cleared out the space, cleaned it, rebuilt the floor and the roof, painted the walls, and so on, all while creating and rehearsing.

The Centro de Artes da Maré hosts many different activities, such as classes, performances and presentations of theatre, dance, photography, film, and visual art; as well as conferences, seminars, exhibitions, and meetings of the inhabitants of Maré. It's also where my dance company is based.

When I decided to set up my company in a *favela*, I was aware that we would be confronted with very specific situations resulting from economic and social inequalities. But for me the artistic act cannot be restricted to the creation of a work of art; it must also create a territory and the conditions to survive, building the ground for the work of art to exist. That is why it is crucial for me to create a physical space devoted to art in a neighbourhood like Maré. It is the space where I create and where I think about my profession and my place in the world.

Another project was born in 2011: the Escola Livre de Dança da Maré (Maré Free Dance School), with more than 300 students between the ages of eight and eighty years old. The school is based on two complementary cores: one with regular dance classes, offered for free to all; and another with a group of fifteen young students who receive continuous training in dance in order to become professionals.

The majority of these students have entered Universidade Federal do Rio de Janeiro (UFRJ), and two of them were admitted last year to PARTS, a dance school which was founded in 1994 by choreographer Anne Teresa De Keersmaeker. Some of them are giving classes in our school.

Recently, artists and cultural institutions in Brazil have been censored and subjected to attacks by ultra-conservative groups and politicians. This is both very serious and dangerous, putting our already fragile democracy at risk. These reactions against art in Brazil say something about what is happening now in many parts of the world, with the endemic bloom of conservatism. The preservation of freedom is in danger and the preservation of the artist's freedom as well. We must be aware of this threat and we must have the courage to denounce it.

Watching a certain show, viewing a certain piece of art, is a choice. However, I'm more concerned to reflect together on how to stop the production of violence and intolerance. When someone forbids the other to have their own voice, it is a violent and intolerant attitude. The question is how to live in this world of voices in the plural without the reinforcement of violent speech.

How could we diminish the speech of attack and war and turn them into conversations? How could we hear the other's voice without erasing or destroying it? How could we live politically and not polemically?

The world has too much war because we do not know how to live in diversity. And diversity depends on the democratic practice of producing dialogue. My work talks about how I deal with the daily violence that exists in the place where I live, and I work in Rio de Janeiro. It is a violence that is there every day.

What has been put into motion through the encounter between the people of Maré and my dance company is a lively process, constantly changing, giving rise to new possibilities. It's like a collective body.

At a time when more and more walls are being built everywhere in the world, when territories are strongly demarcated and protected, and boundaries are imposed and fiercely defended, we propose to make the opposite movement and go against the tendency to exclude a huge part of the population of Rio de Janeiro.

We must not delude ourselves. The sky will eventually fall on our heads. It's a certainty. How will we manage? There can still be hope, but it depends on what we do, how we act. It is a fighting hope.

The title of my latest creation is "For the sky not to fall". Everyone must look for a way to support the sky. For some it will be supporting democracy, for others, solidarity with immigrants and refugees. The possibilities are endless. There are many ways to support the sky. We must fight and persist.

LIA RODRIGUES, dancer and choreographer, is head of the Companhia de Danças in Rio de Janeiro.

The concluding event of Lia Rodrigues' Valeska Gert Visiting Professorship will take place on 14 February at the Akademie der Künste, Pariser Platz.