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Corporeal Mime in embers: intimacy, performative atelier and intervention in the creations of Duo Mimexe

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ABSTRACT – Corporeal Mime in embers: intimacy, performative atelier and intervention in the creations of Duo Mimexe – This article presents some thoughts about Duo Mimexe performative research in relation to Corporeal Mime, over 2018 in the USA. That experience has integrated the residency in laboratory mode with Thomas Leabhart, Leonard Pitt, Corinne Soum and Steven Wasson, Étienne Decroux's former assistants, aiming to understand with studies of re-enactment and the body as an archive the artistic and pedagogical resonances of that art in its current activities, and its intercultural perspectives. The character of the expanded atelier strengthened in the experience is discussed, concluding that the decrouxian artistic manner can serve as a guide for research based on practice, even generating Art.

Keywords: **Corporeal Mime. Duo Mimexe. Performative studio. Performative atelier. Practice as research. Expanded theater.**

RÉSUMÉ – Mime corporel embrasé : intimité, atelier performatif et intervention dans la création du Duo Mimexe – Ce texte présente des réflexions sur la recherche performative réalisée par Duo Mimexe en 2018 aux États-Unis en lien avec le Mime Corporel. L'expérience a intégré la convivialité, en mode laboratoire, avec Thomas Leabhart, Leonard Pitt, Corinne Soum et Steven Wasson, anciens assistants d'Étienne Decroux, afin de comprendre les résonances artistiques et pédagogiques de cet art dans ses activités actuelles, dans les perspectives interculturelles, avec des études de reperformance et le corps comme archives. On discute le caractère de l'atelier élargi renforcé dans l'expérience, en concluant que la manière artistique decrouxien peut encore servir de guide pour les recherches basées sur la pratique générant, y compris, de l'art.

Mots-clés: **Mime Corporel, Duo Mimexe, Atelier performatif, Recherche guidée par la pratique, Théâtre élargi.**

RESUMO – A Mímica Corporal em brasa: intimidade, ateliê performativo e intervenção na criação do Duo Mimexe – Este texto apresenta reflexões sobre a pesquisa performativa realizada pelo Duo Mimexe, em 2018, nos EUA, na relação com a Mímica Corporal. A experiência integrou o convívio, no modo laboratorial, com Thomas Leabhart, Leonard Pitt, Corinne Soum e Steven Wasson, ex-assistentes de Étienne Decroux, objetivando compreender ressonâncias artísticas e pedagógicas daquela arte em suas atividades atuais, em perspectivas interculturais, com estudos de reperformance e o corpo como arquivo. Discute-se o caráter de ateliê expandido fortalecido na experiência, concluindo que a maneira artística decrouxiana ainda pode ser guia de pesquisas baseadas na prática, gerando, inclusive, arte.

Palavras-chave: **Mímica Corporal. Duo Mimexe. Ateliê performativo. Pesquisa guiada pela prática. Teatro expandido.**

The departure, or how to light the fire.

The Covid-19 pandemic has caused a unique social-cultural scenario in the world. In Brazil, it is still difficult to evaluate its consequences in the foreseen future beyond of the tragedy already experienced, counting almost 650 thousand deaths directly related to Sars-Cov-2 virus and its mutations¹.

We have been deeply shaken by all that. Nevertheless, we would like to share an experience in the year 2018, which beyond its theme of laboratory in the performing arts field, also speaks about friendship and love, what we cannot control, what we consider relevant to say at this specific time.

To be able to live without a minimum control over our lives requires knowledge and sensitivity wisdom in various fields of human behavior, hence in life there is always something which escapes us, and is exactly how it's been within the pandemic!

Our knowledge about theatrical performance helps us understand the need for sensitive listening we should exercise, the availability for interaction and the quick responses we should deliver, the responsibilities to assume, requiring us to learn about how to relate to human frailty and changing habits; to the unknown, the uncertain and the ephemeral; the intervention² in our bodies and its mysteries.

This scenic knowledge teaches us some sort of affectionate readiness, which we understand more and more as solidarity; an ethical conduct of mutual help, based on the exercise of trust and love³ that pervades everything we do.

We write under the 'essay inspiration' (Larrosa, 2004) to expose experiences based mainly on love and uncertainty. Therefore, these are narratives describing the results of our performative research and practice, held in the United States of America in 2018. This research guided by on-stage practice was triggered by two research projects which intersected and complemented each other, revealing exploratory disposition, bibliographic review management, as well as an engaged creative observation.

The laboratory path on those projects was already referenced in the work of scenic artist Étienne Marcel Decroux (1898-1991) and its technique called Corporeal Mime, developed during five decades over the last century⁴.

Worthy of note is that the term laboratory was never used directly by Decroux, although that attitude as an artist-researcher was clearly evident from the first decade of his scenic work, as emphasized in the book *Étienne Decroux e a Artesania de ator: caminhos para a soberania* (Braga, 2013)⁵. Thus, when referring to the laboratory activity in the life of Decroux, we prefer to speak in *atelier*⁶, seeking to highlight a practice of artisanship, as well as visual arts creative processes which have been seen in contemporary times as an expanded notion of *atelier* (Facco, 2017) towards inter-Arts and Inter-knowledge, something that inspires us.

The performative atelier comprises multiple experiences between spatialities and temporalities, between the arduous creative work and leisureliness; it marks creative processes and artistic identities to which we identify with. In that perspective, we recognize the existence of Decroux's performative atelier installed on specific places of his own, his safe haven, for the development of his research and pedagogy for the actor, along with his creative work and public performances to small groups.

For Decroux, '[...] theater is the Art of the actor' (Decroux, 1994, p. 40). This conceptual and practical axis adopted by him since the 1930s in his theatrical experiences in Paris, has a historical dialogue with the work previously developed by Jacques Copeau (1849-1949) at his *Vieux Colombier* experimental school, that integrated the process of re-theatralization of the modern scene.

Decroux studied at that school during 1926, where he acknowledged having received from Suzanne Bing (1885-1967) and Copeau himself, the precious orientation for the beginning of his studies of theater and mime (Decroux, 1964). He then worked with Charles Dullin (1885-1949) at the *Theatre de l'Atelier*, in Paris, and at his *École Nouvelle du Comédien*, for which Dullin had published a manifesto in 1921, published again in 1930, which highlights the fact that he did not claim it to be a theatrical company, but a '[...] dramatic research laboratory' (Dullin, 1969, p. 32; p. 223; p. 246). It is Dullin who welcomes Decroux at his school (theatrical company)

laboratory in October 1925, allowing him to carry out activities as an actor-researcher. Something we find fundamental to his research. There, he would remain collaborating and experimenting for about twenty years, even though he founded his own place of experimentation and school during the Nazi occupation of France. Important to say that Decroux worked concomitantly as an actor on stage, film and radio⁷.

Decroux's activities in Dullin's atelier comprised of actors and students' technical preparation, advising Dullin with his own work on gestural improvisation, especially mime experiments and mask playing, along with assisting the group on their character compositions, possibly including a general hands-on training on directing (Braga, 2013).

All this engagements may have strengthened a laboratory attitude of performative research in Decroux, since he was already developing a technique of body acting later named by him as *La Mime Corporel* (Corporeal Mime) together with experimental performances, something that is a trademark of his artistic identity. And we can't rule out that the figure of Dullin, himself a graduate of the *Vieux Colombier*, may have impacted Decroux as an artist guiding teacher (Pezin, 2003).

Therefore, when we acknowledge the presence of a laboratory subject posed by Decroux over our 2018 research projects, its evidence comes primarily from a perspective of purposed research which already foresaw the work within intimacy as a strong intervention approach in ourselves, activating our relational body, and placing ourselves with those who were also willing to be together (Maturana, 2001; Taylor and Viveiros de Castro, 2007). Our practice of atelier starts from Corporeal Mime mannerisms⁸, and have been developed in singular circumstances during our research, pointing out to what Decroux says: '[...] what I think I do. At times, I am either the subject or the object. I am an artisan, I am also matter' (Pezin, 2003, p. 107). So, we call upon Corporeal Mime for the handling of our intimacies and the provocation of a state of 'ember' that sprouts new incarnated knowledge in ourselves.

For that purpose, we planned research actions which led us to be in close contact with those who could guide us through such transformations: some of Decroux's former assistants who live in the United States, Thomas

Leabhart (Claremont, CA), Leonard Pitt (Berkeley, CA), Corinne Soum and Steven Wasson (Spring Green, WI)⁹.

Our laboratory proposal was, therefore, to live with them in their creative environment. We stayed with Leabhart, Pitt, Corinne and Steven, for the time it was possible for us, investigating how Corporeal Mime reverberated in each one of them at the present time, both in their creative process, their pedagogy and even in their published writings. We took classes and training with them, we listened to them in various ways, we actively observed in a participatory and creative way on such processes and shared time, making all possible and allowed records. Therein, we have included interviews and semi-structured observations establishing a criteria for our perceptions.

We also recorded in video, photo and in writing adding to what was already imprinted on our moving bodies. We dwelt on their performative atelier particularities, observing with curiosity how they act today within the performative experimental and pedagogical aspects inherited from Decroux. After all, they are active Corporeal Mime's contemporary artistic voices widely recognized internationally.

Although some scholars claim that Decroux "[...] produced few performances" (Schino, 2012, p. 56), such statement seems quite rash to us. We did not want to categorize beforehand what could result from our creative process over our research. Decroux created and performed several short Corporeal Mime pieces, technical demonstrations, numerous performative or oral lectures. He also directed and played with his group a 75 minute piece, *Les Petits Soldats*. All that without considering the creative process present in the elaboration of its pedagogy for actors.

So, in our time with his former assistants we opted to inquire about each one's performance practices resulting from their life and work contexts, understanding that performative production can take place in plural settings and not only within conventional scenic models.

It is important to say that Decroux, his students and assistant actors performed privately to invited audiences at his school and other art schools (Braga, 2013). From late 1940s to 1962, Decroux traveled extensively to several countries with his theatrical company, such as Belgium, England,

the Netherlands, Israel, Italy, Switzerland, Sweden and Norway, to carry out the activities already mentioned here (De Marinis, 1993). Between 1957 and 1961, Decroux visited the United States performing with his company, including Carnegie Hall's Weill Recital. In 1963, Decroux decided to return to Paris resuming his school on his father self-made house basement and there he installed his 'basement atelier' as we call it.

We kept alight our ember blowing them with such desires and stories, in addition to our projects. We wanted an intense experience in 2018. And for that, we left our comfort zone, between life playing games and professional expression... and, so, arrived in New York.

The initial purpose of that trip was to complete a postdoctoral performance research activity at New York University (New York University) at the department of Performance Studies, under Professor André Torres Lepecki¹⁰ supervision, including field activities guided by artistic practice, mediated by creative observation, with former Decroux assistants living in the United States; and an independent performative practice as research activity, under supervision of Corine Soum and Steven Wasson. The resulting collected data was obtained primarily from personal collections of those living archives artists. We too produced data during our creative process that, even if intended, were not planned as *a sine qua non* condition to our research.

We would have a long stay under a change of atmosphere and moods. As Jean-Louis Barrault (1910-1994) would say, 'Decroux (was) the researcher... in front of him I improvised...' (Barrault, 1972, p. 72). We were open to improvise, even though we could bring our own experience of researches from South America with a decolonizing desire.

Impermanence or how to keep the fire burning

Twelve years ago, we, the authors, met because of Corporal Mime. Each one already had a particular path in training and a professional performance career in acting not exclusively related to the art of Decroux. At that meeting, we could share what we stood for on our creative process: working ethics belief, teaching, research and desires; and how all that was

related to what we learned through Corporeal Mime, in Brazil and abroad¹¹. Although we haven't met Étienne Decroux in person, we realized after meeting that we shared between us his intransigence in wanting to be somehow *gauche* in life¹².

At the beginning of 2018, before boarding our flight to New York and start the journey themed here, we came across a man fingering his seven-string guitar. We exchanged names and João Nicolau de Almeida, João 'Macacão'¹³, was present at the beginning of our intense history of life, poetry, immense work and unimaginable challenges. We sang along 'Naquela Mesa' a samba canção composed Sérgio Bittencourt as an homage to his deceased father, the mandolin virtuoso Jacob do Bandolim.

We carried in our suitcases much more than the so-called personal belongings. With us were also Brazilian Theater caring learning memories, full of exchanges of experiences, special places on our creative process, and aesthetics subversion out of deep studies revealed. All that framed by the laboratory path. The performative atelier theme pulsating in us as a mixture between the search for performative modes of existence, different from those related to a more commercial theater; and the search for spaces-times that exude formative and experimental creative processes, within an affectionate and intimate dimension.

The first memory that, manifested, provoked us about the laboratory theme, was the theatrical work of Maria Clara Machado, founder of the company *O Tablado* in Rio de Janeiro, in the 1950s, where Maria Clara elaborated and launched, in 1956, the magazine *Cadernos de Teatro*. This was the first theater magazine available in Brazil in which we could read about theatrical practices, acting techniques, mask, mime, improvisation, both in Belo Horizonte, Minas Gerais, and in Porto Alegre, Rio Grande do Sul. 'Cadernos' opened us to perspectives of acting research guided by artistic practice, indicating knowledgeable body wisdom and the ludic aspect in theater playing.

Between the late 1940s and early 1950s, Maria Clara Machado attended a course with famous French actor Jean-Louis Barrault, a Decroux former student and stage partner. She also took a course in Corporeal Mime herself in 1952. Her article on issue number 4 of *Cadernos*, entitled Gesture, pantomime, mime and improvisation, refers to Decroux as the

master of all mimes. In 1964, she created a well regarded regular theater course at *Tablado*. Therein a Theater company-school-atelier-magazine junction, which seems to us an enriching aspect of being a Brazilian theatrical laboratory, even though influenced by her French experience.

O Tablado also influenced Paschoal Carlos Magno (1906-1980) to promote the implementation of university theatrical schools in Brazil and creator of *Teatro Duse*.

It was from our enrollment at Theater Graduation courses at the Federal University of Minas Gerais-UFMG and the Federal University of Rio Grande do Sul-UFRGS, that brought us the first instruments of laboratory-oriented scenic practice. In our time as students, we met professors artists and directors with performative research practices, who guided and encouraged us to follow this path, either being Paulo César Bicalho (1939) in Belo Horizonte, or Irion Nolasco (1943) in Porto Alegre or, still, Maria Helena Lopes (1934), with whom we both studied in different cities, circumstances and moments of our lives.

It was through our University Theater schools that we also met theatrical companies like *Teatro LUME* (1985) which, from the beginning of its existence had a theater laboratory orientation. We attended workshops on actor training taught by Luiz Otávio Burnier, who had studied with Étienne Decroux in Paris in the 1970s, and Carlos Simioni. We could also mention the important scenic works of José Celso Martinez Corrêa (1937) and Antunes Filho (1929-2019), with whom we had the opportunity to live and learn; figures that mark a Brazilian performative atelier identity in our view, each with their own ideas and research, but each in its own way, converging on the motto of artistic practice as research by asking their own questions, developing exploratory creative paths and presenting innovative art.

In our ten-hour flight over forests and the Caribbean Sea in complete darkness, we thought about our experimental scenic searches, crossed by the theme of laboratory associated to public University institutions in Brazil that value such proposals in the scope of academic research and extension, such as the experience installed in UFMG at the *Laboratório de Pesquisa em Atuação LAPA/CNPq*¹⁴ Without a physical place, *LAPA* seeks to exhale the intensity of performative atelier wherever we could be. There, we focus on

behaviors, attitudes, guidelines, and a search for artisan-oriented acting, all that reverberating in the classes we teach, the research and academic orientations we carried out, as well as in the creative processes we experience.

For us, to be in performative laboratory action is to enable an alteration of emotions and of existence whichever place we are, whoever we are relating to, and using of our technical artistic repertoires that, in fact, are poetry of action exposed in life's quotidian. It is, therefore, ways of an expanded atelier. We wished an experience of high intensity with the trip to the United States, and we believe we have succeeded.

So, the year 2018 has warmed our intimate encounter. All that we have accomplished in that period has strengthened in us an expanded performative atelier culture in poetic-practical encounters and reencounterings with several people in the United States. Some of them are the masters aforementioned; others are artists, artist-teachers, theoretical teachers, and last not least, our new friends.

Early 2019, we named our artistic and life partnership as *Duo Mimexe*, making it also an artistic arm of *LAPA* Research Group, bringing us together in a single professional ethos who wants to radiate performative 'fire' wherever we are.

New York welcomed us with snow. It was a joyful and playful reception out of our tropical life, painting the landscape in a unique color and inviting us to intervene with our palette. Izabel Lam, the hostess of our small room, looked at us with curiosity when there we arrived full of physical dispositions to make everything possible in the pursuit of our well-being and in the achievement of our research goals.

At the NYU, we reviewed the plans of the investigations to be undertaken in dialogue with Professor André T. Lepecki. We started the activities of reference research in the archives of institutions we were given access, which, fortunately, were not few¹⁵. At first, we researched notions such as proto-performance (Schechner, 2006), the body as archive and reenactment¹⁶(Lepecki, 2011; 2016).

Life in our small room and the need to care about our financial resources have determined some of our research routines and so the prospect of staying around Leabhart, Pitt, Soum and Wasson in their location. For-

tunately, we managed to get access to a classroom at the Performance Studies Department for our practical research. However, it was not easy to maintain the motivation to review Decroux's inspired physical training practice and craftsmanship ethics, procedures we have adopted and that somehow were conflicting with our new challenges.

The notion of craftsmanship demands a specific in-depth practice that expect reflections on artistic materiality, without being reduced into formalism. It is a self-centered practice in which intimacy plays with an installed material reality, expressing something in a singular way, mediated by a bodily skill developed to a higher level. But it can also be an approach to existence that praises a deepening on listening and dealing with itself, willing to find the other from that intimate intervention. It also incorporates an ethical practice in how to live without being seduced by a gained hard work artisan's virtuosity.

In our point of view an artisan like practice can amalgamate form, content, matter and modes of existence, and can be established in specific work routines and rhythms in the experimentation with a given material¹⁷. Such bodily craftsmanship indicates our material culture as research actors/performers. It reveals how something is done and the quality of that doing.

From New York we set off to Claremont, CA, to stay with Thomas Leabhart for five weeks accompanying his work at Pomona College Department of Theatre and Dance, where he teaches Corporeal Mime content to youngsters, as well as offering training to a selected group, resonating Decroux's art form.

Former student and Decroux's assistant between 1968 and 1972, Leabhart included us in his classes and training activities. We had already studied with him in workshops in Brazil and France, so we were there to better understand his pedagogy and his current atelier practice. The significance of visiting Leabhart to our research was to experience the high-standards of Pomona's physical spaces for his classes and research, to follow his classes routine — not necessarily in performing arts —, his openness to receive visiting artists wanting to study with him for a period of time, the possibility of researching alone in outstanding spaces, and last not least, his work at that time with his group of three young non-artists, with whom we took

part in the training of *The Carpenter (Le Menuisier)*¹⁸, two Figures and some rigorous exercises of body scales taken from Corporeal Mime vast repertoire.

Our working week went from Monday to Friday, having daily encounters with Tom. In some of those days, we settled in the tiny Seaver Theatre carpeted lobby to take classes and training which would pose as an unusual scene in the face of a wealth of resources at Pomona, and led us to ask why his Corporeal Mime ongoing laboratory, even though being external to curriculum activities, could not always be performed in one of the several theatrical spaces of a top 5 ranked institution in its category? Is Pomona unaware of Leabhart scenic and written work relevance, or the possibility of academic research based on artistic practices?

Upon our request, we were given access to Pomona Library where we ran into already known bibliographical references, but no archives of any sort related to Leabhart previous performances at the institution. So, we remained with the information already disseminated by Leabhart through *The Mime Journal*, a highly recognized Pomona publication devoted to Corporeal Mime and Physical Theater, edited by him, with entire editions dedicated to texts, interviews and iconography of and about Decroux¹⁹. Institutional contacts with other teachers were made by our own initiative.

In the course of our activities, Leabhart started repeating about his 'Californian school' of Corporeal Mime, showing a distinct transmission mode for the art form. During his group activities, we noticed his strong interest in making many formal corrections of technical content, insisting on a body alignment which inevitably provoked great tension and resulted in a non-fluid movement. However, as far as we understood, the 'Californian school' would aim the opposite, that is, not to stiffen the actor's expressive movements. Unfortunately, during our stay we were not able to fully clarify this apparent paradox. Also, there wasn't an attempt into managing a dialogue between our bodies and the decrouvian technique in order to accommodate cultural and previous learning experiences done with other teachers.

In his classes with Pomona students, we developed a composition exercise we were quite familiar with from attended workshops in 1995, in Porto Alegre (Alexandre), and in Paris, in 2009 (Bya). We abide to Lea-

bhart guidelines by carrying out the 'still movement'²⁰ research, following his observation that the study was an important means of exercising the unblocking of creativity before such work using Corporeal Mime.

The performative atelier we have experienced there strengthened our understanding that transmission and research through Corporeal Mime art form need to be worked in a cultural dialogic sense, under positive generational exchanges and gender perspective, considering possible differences in Decroux's transmission. Moreover, even with the opportunity opened by Leabhart, to research with him in practice, enjoying the rich facilities of Pomona College, we were not able to advance much in practical or even in theoretical understanding about the specificity of his Californian school. Therefore, we left Claremont better understanding the atelier in ourselves.

From Claremont we went straight to Berkeley, CA to meet with Leonard Pitt (1941), a student for four years and Decroux first assistant after his return from New York, just before to that of Leabhart.

Pitt left Paris for Berkeley at the beginning of 1970, where he founded his Physical Theater school. He later became a praised performer and mask teacher, after his period in Bali to learn and perform in that mask tradition. Today, far from its Corporeal Mime training, Pitt remains tied to the French culture by writing bestselling books about Paris architecture now and then.

He welcomed us into his own home and there we had such a special experiences in different ways. We spent ten days and nights with him witnessing his truly artistic atelier house while being presented to his broaden artistic ability: apart being a teacher, writer and scenic artist, he has also a unique work in sculpture. We had the privilege of watching him directing a clown's duo show whose actors were over sixty-five years old. During the rehearsal, we notice his acute look towards the actors' body composition, something in between physical and absurd comedy. Pitt had told us about his great admiration for Laurel & Hardy films; and his love for chocolate. He is the president of a chocolate tasting club in the city, whose meetings take place monthly at his beautiful English cottage, designed by him and built on his backyard. It was at that fairy tale like house where Pitt affectionately sheltered us despite we being strangers and having more dreams than money in our pockets.

We had a respectful and generous coexistence with Lenny, receiving his great willingness in talking to us, with a profound interest in listening what we wanted to research through Corporeal Mime, if he could be of any help. Besides allowing the use of his kitchen, he invited us to go out with him, following his daily routines and habits, showing us his new project about Paris. From his home atelier, we saw emerge a profusion of skills and knowledge, with some predominantly in the artist practice that can be transmitted. Pitt also revealed his intense affection for the Balinese masks. Pitt neither did nor taught masking performance anymore for quite a long time. But, on a Saturday afternoon while chatting in his living room, he brought an old and dusty suitcase he used as a prop while performing and teaching, and opened it to us. And without a word, he took one mask, dressed it and performed *Doppo*, his most famous character. It was just a few minutes performance and in a simple way, but gesturing potently and full of affection.

At Lenny's atelier house we have seen another Corporeal Mime resonate, perceiving it as a skillful expressive multiplicity²¹. We were absolutely delighted, after all, Decroux also expressed himself artistically in multiple ways. Having all its doors unlocked, we realized that the atelier house resonated a decrouvian vigor, but a sweet one, so that we could live there with intensity surrounded by chocolate sweet aroma, Balinese masks, spectacular sculptures and many toys from his grandson Miles.

With Lenny and Miles, we visited the Pacific Ocean for the first time, rolling together on the sand and playing in its freezing waters. Everything led us to remember that life in the atelier also needs affection, pleasure, creative leisure, goodwill actions, cultural respect, solidarity and child-like behavior.

From Berkeley we head to the rural area of Spring Green, WI, at the time, with approximately 1,600 inhabitants. There we would find French Corinne Soum (1956) and American Steven Wasson (1950), directors of the Theatre l'Ange Fou, for a first stay of five weeks that would subsequently be repeated for another five weeks, with the development of research of an initial experimental show, based on our first results. It is necessary to stress that, although much desired, playing a show was not something

planned by us. To our joy, it materialized from improvisational laboratory results during the technical and repertoire classes with Corinne and Steven.

The location of the Theatre l'Ange Fou, 15km out of Spring Green urban area, required a particular logistics to stay there. Fortunately, we were hosted by Carie Graves in her house over a hill with no neighbors nearby, two kilometers away from l'Ange Fou.

Carie was an Olympic and world rowing champion, captaining the first women's team in the United States. She later devoted herself to coaching rowing teams at Harvard and Texas Universities. Among many medals, hammers²², works of art, wild animals and silence, we were welcomed by Carie. Daily life with her and her family, whose parents were friends of prominent American architect Frank Lloyd Wright, was an important extension of the atelier experience with l'Ange Fou. Carie talked to us about her training as an Olympic athlete, the challenges and joys competing in numerous championships she took part in, her work as a coach, and especially the value of teamwork to overcome physical pain, the longing of her deceased father²³.

The two periods spent in Spring Green on l'Ange Fou, were full of expectations. We returned to carry out an important part of our performative research with Corporeal Mime masters we admire for all they represent for the keeping and revision of its oral way of transmission. We arrived there as artists, teachers and researchers, guided by artistic practice, without the objective of accumulating knowledge to, for example, create a Brazilian Corporeal Mime school. At times we realized that it was necessary to repeat to Corinne and Steven about the objective of our research

there, what we pursue professionally, which was received with some amazement when we talked about the serious university work in Theater and the research as practice we endured. Our main strategy of survival on all fronts was to always agree and execute everything that was proposed to us, listening and seeking to re-elaborate our issues, such as those related to technical artistic modes and transmission copyrights, and the re-performance of Corporeal Mime pieces, both classical and postmodern. That is to say: questions related to the memory of that art form, its continuity and revision in the 21st century.

That resulted in conversations about schools created by former students of Soum and Wasson, which seemed commendable to us for the maintenance and revision of this theatrical art. However, we identified there a certain fear with the possibility of that being carried out without the technical *rigueur* according to l'Ange Fou pedagogical model, even though such transmission is done by graduates of their school, or, even worse, with deviations that could feed some existing prejudices related to that art, such as that it can be reduced to a geometric gymnastic training of the body, absent from creativity, which is a complete misunderstanding. The training does not aim to stiffen the body with a unique readable code or even dismiss creativity (Braga, 2015). Decroux says: "[...] mime produces presence that are not just conventional signals. And if it comes to produce such signs it's because it died" (Decroux, 1964, p. 144)²⁴.

In 2010, Soum and Wasson acquired the Wyoming Valley Church property, a 1902 white wooden building that was deconsecrated in 2008. This church along with its parochial house was transformed into a beautiful theater space, with the stage and aisles located where the altar was, full of scenic materials, among them a chair inherited from the house of Decroux. Seats are located where the church benches were and can accommodate up to sixty people. The stained glass windows now are covered by curtains. The parish house is Corinne and Steven home with their two Maine Coon cats.

Since 2012, these two artist teachers work there, reviewing, updating and transmitting the art of Corporeal Mime through the White Church Theatre Project, created by them.

We have come a long way both in the distance and in our lives to reach the headquarters of *l'Ange Fou*, as researchers-artists-teachers. We were part of the White Church Theatre Project paid activities, with the perspective of updating our knowledge about Corporeal Mime and Physical Theater aiming to advancing it and later contributing to the Brazilian performing field, which includes discussing the laboratory themed scenic research on university circles. Richard Schechner asks: '[...] why do we not examine critically its [University] work and its possibilities or failures as theatrical laboratory sites?' (Schino, 2012, p. 188).

Our projects included this critical examination, as it was made possible by two universities, one Brazilian (UFMG) and the other North American (NYU). Therefore we sought the best approximation between Corporeal Mime inherited artistic world, represented by Leabhart, Pitt, Soum and Wasson, and the academic performative and artistic, to which we are part. In addition, we made efforts for both Soum or Wasson to be given an Honorary Doctorate, seeking support from Italian theorist Marco De Marinis, who gave exclusive seminars at the *École* in London, being able to collect much valued data from *l'Ange Fou* to carry out his theoretical research²⁵.

Our activities there consisted of Corporeal Mime training five days a week either with Soum or Wasson, or them both²⁶. When possible, we could observe them teaching and directing actors, we had weekly Q&A private sessions related to our research, access to videos and recorded conferences of the company, alongside bibliographic research in the small Spring Green public library. On weekends we could use the space for some specific training, and on two occasions, we did cat-sitting when they needed to be absent. And, last not least, helped in what was demanded of us for the care of the training and rehearsal space.

For us *l'Ange Fou* space is a contemporary performance atelier that dialogues with a 20th-century laboratory perspective described by some theater scholars (Schino, 2012). They managed to gather in that space their theater company, the International School of Corporeal Mime and their house. With the White Church Theater Project initiative it keeps up with creative and teaching activities it has carried out since 1984²⁷, in Paris and London.

It is important to say that since the 1970s Spring Green is a national reference and a pedagogical and artistic center related to mime art, clowning and masks. The Wyoming Valley Studio, which was located about two kilometers from The White Church, was the most important center for the transmission and diffusion of Corporeal Mime in the country, as well as 'the' center of physical theater training in the United States between the years of 1974 and 78, according to The New York Times (Gilbert, 2016). We were able to walk along where it was located, which today is a millionaire's hunter weapons depot. It has hosted the Wisconsin Mime Theater

and School, founded and coordinated by Professor E. Reid Gilbert, a student of Decroux in New York, whom we also met on the occasion of the release of his latest book, and talked about his importance in the dissemination of Corporeal Mime in the United States and his experience directing such a space.

The experimental school of Professor Gilbert was part of a pedagogical program with classes in architecture and mask, modern dance, No Theater, among other contents. Leabhart was a teacher and artistic director at this school between 1976 and 1978. Wasson joined his artistic group at that time. Our expectations with *l'Ange Fou*, which were already many, only increased with the curiosities and stories of the Valley, updating our questions. And as if all that wasn't enough, seven kilometers from the White Church, lies the American Players Theater - APT, a theatrical enterprise in an area of 45 hectares that holds an open-air amphitheater with about a thousand seats, an enclosed theater with 200 seats, scenography and costumes workshops and depots, an ample outdoor space for picnics and a shop selling APT's merchandise. From June to November, there are a mix of open air and inside performances with an audience over 100,000 spectators! Would there be any form of laboratory intention, another form of theatrical laboratory associated to the cultural industry?

These experiences have expanded and strengthened our atelier path in an important way, motivating debates about the relationship of an experimental performance production with the public. The theatrical culture of *l'Ange Fou* also includes the relationship with the public, although there is a clear value of artistic research, experimentation, review and pedagogical update that does not reach the public, not even closer to that of APT's.

Due to our previous time with *l'Ange Fou*, we could envision²⁸ the maintenance of ethical purposes in its work, a sustained mode of existence through performative atelier with an important evolutionary transformation in the development of technical research on Corporeal Mime. Among the experiences we had with *l'Ange Fou* and his former students, now professors, whether in London, Brazil or Spain, at different times, and its work in Spring Green, we noticed a technical richness on decrouvian scales creative variations, as well as a distancing from the fast pace technical training,

which gave a special stimulus to beginner students when together in the classroom. They were also part of *Theatre l'Ange Fou*²⁹.

In Spring Green, the emphasis of working on scales shifted from speed to the ability to aggregate movements of body contradiction, opposing fluidity with speed, dynamics of distinct rhythm and creative imagination. Likewise, the same applied to the work on body parts within the elements of the technique. In one of the Q&A held every Thursday mornings, we understood that the change on focusing on speed to plasticity was to seek eliminating the risk of an inaccurate execution of movement, and to inhibit virtuosity.

It was challenging to research in performing with expressive body contradiction, putting ourselves to the test in executing non equivalent or sequential physical games. Gymnastic elements did exist, but they were about art and life. Finally, we experienced there an emphasis of greater corporal investigation which motivated into a more complex expressiveness in our gestural composition.

In 2011, on her last visit to Brazil, Soum taught a course of Corporeal Mime as part of UFMG Winter Festival held at Diamantina, Minas Gerais, such diversity was dealt by her as something welcomed, recognizing the different learning possibilities within the technique.

On the other hand, the artist-teacher Soum is extremely demanding and rigorous with the quality of performing within this context, working on a novice entry level aided by her training experience in artistic gymnastics and classical dance, which resulted in greater body perception for the apprentice.

Between our periods in Spring Green, we started wondering about the possibility of a proposal based on the improvisations we managed to do at *l'Ange Fou*, so we began preparing some of that material to present as an artistic result of our research in the USA. At that time, we had the opportunity to participate in a call to upcoming artists from The Dixon Place Theatre in New York. In the meantime, we also attended Chicago's Physical Fest, taking part on workshops and watching shows. Until then we did not know whether we would be able to return to *l'Ange Fou* or presenting a performance.

We return to the second stay in Spring Green to deepen our gestural improvisations performed hearing the voices previously inviting us for the creation of a composition, a show, to be presented in August at White Church.

We would then received some quite specific orientations from Soum and Wasson, which we identified as related to their experience of putting up a show rooted in Corporeal Mime physical expression. This work resulted, thus, in our first performance, lasting approximately forty minutes, presented at The White Church, from August, 24th to 27th. The show entitled 'The Dreams of an Umbrella', had an aesthetic directing signature, especially in the use of objects and props and the umbrella object, which we recognized from other shows of the company. Although it was composed through themed improvisation, it was done in our bodies, with our bodies, thus possessing a strong ownership revealing issues in our professional experiences, our individuality and coexistence as a couple. So, we were performing something that was very personal through known decrouvian structures, coming from training repertoires under Soum and Wasson guidance, and among all that, re-performed 'The Table' piece³⁰, created by Wasson and Leabhart.

We managed to do that with The Table piece because it was directly connected to our studies in re-enactment and body as Archive. Initially, we started improvising over the piece specific gestural structure. That enabled us to create some very particular gestural compositions which were executed all moments we re-performed The Table piece.

At the *École* in London, between 2000 and 2005, the emphasis on work with scales was primed on speed (the faster, the better), and there was an excellent group of actors and actresses who accomplished doing scales quickly and accurately, reverberating their technical quality as well as their creativity in improvisations. This group of mostly graduates, attended the school for repertoire

After this more concrete stage of the research, we returned to New York with the confirmation that we had been accepted by Dixon to perform there.

It would be another experimental performance, this time, in a place with an important history in the New York off-off Broadway scene. We decided to go a little further in the practical research we carried out deciding for a new laboratory process. We planned to compose a work that could start from the performative experiences carried out, but increasingly opening it up to our own research and poetic interests. As a result, we returned to attend the rooms of the Department of Performance Studies and, there we installed our unique atelier (Barba, 2019), reworking our performative materials, reconstructing some of them, adding others, allowing the emergence of a work in progress. And so 'It takes two to Tangle', as we named it, was premiered on October 19th, 2018 at Dixon Place.

Our final atelier could not be structured without the support of our new friends for life Izabel Lam, Gerhard Schutte and Betsy, Rodrigo Fischer and Ilion Troya, who strengthened our expanded atelier with financial, logistical, material and, mainly, affective support.

'It takes two to Tangle', which translates as *Dois em Laço* in Portuguese, is therefore a performance that contains playfulness acting. It offers to those who are accustomed to the theater of stories, a non-linear, unrealistic story of a couple who acts as authors of this embodied text.

But it could be anyone else's life, as it's in the opening of the Act. Poetic action strongly inspired by decrouvian mannerisms, listening to what himself says: "[...] the way of doing is worth more than doing" (Decroux, 1964, p. 145) and "[...] if the piece lacks the charm of a story, where can its charm be? In the manner" (1994, p. 144). The poetry of action today continues in its own way subversive. We, therefore, open the lace and, paradoxically, tighten the knot between moments of rest.



Figure 1 e 2: Alexandre Brum Correa and Bya Braga in *It takes two to Tangle*,
Dixon Place-NYC, 2018. Photo: Izabel Lam

The arrival, or letting the fire sleep

The experience on intensity, intimacy and intervention that we, *Duo Mimexe*, had in direct relation with Corporeal Mime in the USA in 2018, allowed us to have today a broaden understanding and important updates about this art form, which resonates in our performative research, pedagogical modes and creative processes.

We have obtained evidence of its distinct reception in the United States through our interaction with Leabhart, Pitt, Soum and Wasson, and historical data collected on the presence of Decroux in the US, which unveiled a more concrete and updated perspective in acknowledging the reception of a European art Corporeal Mime in America, with its values and the requirements for its learning within the need for a non-cultural subordination.

We, Brazilians and Latin Americans have our own skills and knowledge.

It is essential that a responsible and critical interculturality is exercised in those learning and technical artistic interactions in Corporeal Mime, as it is legitimate that we should include artistic hybridism resulted from a seri-

ous established conviviality. Then, we can glimpse inventions, advancing performatively.

We present briefly, below, within the laboratory issue, some understanding and propositions based on our of performative research acting experience in 2018:

- i. The performative research atelier in the art of actress/actor/performer related to the decrouvian atelier can exist in physical spaces and be varied in its characteristics and objectives of activities, although it commonly combines teaching/technical learning, technical training and repertoire, as well as creative processes, besides the Entertainment Industry demands. On the other hand, it can also exist only in us, within the willingness to reverberate a unique atelier culture in different places and activities, including, here, in the university space, research groups, or even within specific academic activities. In any case, it needs financial resources for subsistence of its activities.
- ii. A performative atelier in relationship to the art Corporeal Mime can exist in an expanded way. Along with acting research, the creation and presentation of performances and shows, one can mix with the life of various beings, the common good and the creation of a community sense, as well as love. A house atelier, or even temporary itinerant ateliers can reveal that.
- iii. It is a profusion of unique experiences to be in contact of masters, teachers or artists, especially with whom we have already made research and pedagogy links, and who have a performative laboratory culture related to the art of the actor, to theater as a playing game and not only linked to a spoken theater tradition. Corporeal Mime is, indeed, an art *off/for* the actor that strongly collaborates to achieve that. Thus, relating to its past, recognizing it, valuing it and revising it in the present time, always seeking to advance in the face of contemporary challenges.

- iv. The culture of the performative atelier tends to strengthen researches guided by the practice of acting within universities, for researchers/artists/teachers and students who want to join it, even in temporary ties. It can also influence institutions and theatrical groups working according to the entertainment industry logic, but which are open to acting research in an independent performance out of Dramaturgy.
- v. Respecting leadership and working dynamics in the atelier is an essential condition for the transmission of skills that even transcends its technical aspect. However, the performative atelier does not want to produce copies, but a pulsating desire. It does not want arrogant, abusive and choleric leaders bullying apprentices and participants in the name of (good) 'learning' or because is the style of their school. Good practices should therefore be encouraged and adopted within clear protocols of conduct in performative ateliers, even those of a private nature such as those in Western Theater history.
- vi. To let practices, records of their production and conviviality, partial or final results, is part of the ethics established for the meeting in the atelier. Scientific laboratories are an important reference in that matter. Nevertheless, access to what has been achieved should be allowed to all who have created and worked on its results.
- vii. Performing in the atelier and resonate performances, shows, all that has been lived there is very welcomed as its part of creative results obtained which can also come to public. From the creative results, it can find artistic transpositions that reveal a performer's deep inner images, something that can teach us about freedom and what can unite us all.
- viii. In the face of a crisis in the atelier, one can first breathe and then eat a chocolate. Then, listen and talk. Silence. If everybody decides to remain to keep working, very well. If not, rest. And silence again. If there is another chocolate, eat it. Train and catch your breath. Sing *Naquela Mesa*. Reperform The Table

piece, even if it has only three legs... Then make the atelier survive on your own utopia. Or live with your love.

- ix. The performative atelier is *manière*... A manner of blowing embers.

Notes

- ¹ Data collected from the Brazilian Press consortium, on 01/29/2021: <https://g1.globo.com/bemestar/coronavirus/noticia/2021/01/29/casos-e-mortes-por-coronavirus-no-brasil-em-29-de-janeiro-segundo-consorcio-de-veiculos-de-imprensa.ghtml>. Acesso em 29/01/2021.
- ² As in Artistic Intervention definition on Tate Modern Glossary of Art terms.
- ³ When we refer to love, we include the thoughts of Latin American scientist Humberto Maturana about love being an emotion that underlies the human, that happens in our biology, that is the source of human socialization and that does not appear as a concept, but as a fundamental behavior as well as play (1998; Maturana and Verden-Zöller, 2004).
- ⁴ Here, we adopted Corporeal Mime and not Dramatic Corporeal Mime. The second name is also valid and is widespread in the preface to the 2008 Catalan translation of Étienne Decroux book, *Paroles sur le mime* (1964), and in the preface to the 2000 Spanish translation.
- ⁵ Étienne Decroux and the artisan actor. A path towards sovereignty'
- ⁶ This was discussed by Bya Braga in her book about the artist Decroux, 'Étienne Decroux and the artisan actor. A path towards sovereignty' (Ed. UFMG, 2013). In 2014, in Malta, she personally presented her book to Professor Frank Camilleri of the University of Malta. Camilleri edited and prefaced, in 2015, the book by Marco De Marinis Étienne Decroux and his Theatre Laboratory, reprinting part of the book *Mimo e teatro nel Novecento* (1993), by the same author, with the new title related to the laboratory theme.
- ⁷ The artistic action of Decroux is not only intense but also varied, passing through the French cinema and radio (Braga, 2013).
- ⁸ The word *manner* here makes direct reference to the French word *manière* used by Decroux. It is an important notion in his art, bringing a sense of path and method in which something is performed, or even produced in the art

form Corporeal Mime art. It is an ethical quality in the acting-thinking of his art, being also associated with the actor's playing (Braga, 2013).

- ⁹ Each, in his own way, is too the author of important publications written about Decroux and France, editing periodicals and creative performances, contributing to the creative revision of Decroux's art.
- ¹⁰ This postdoctoral program at New York University did not receive any research funding support. We have asked more than once CNPq (National Council for Scientific and Technological Development). The project was approved, but there were no financial resources. We have the institutional support of the Department of Performing Arts of the School of Fine Arts of the Federal University of Minas Gerais, which granted Bya Braga's absence from its activities at UFMG during the investigation period.
- ¹¹ Bya Braga attended Corporeal Mime classes with Thomas Leabhart, in Paris, and at the MOVEO School, in Barcelona. In Brazil, she studied with Corinne Soum, Ana Cláudia Teixeira and Paulo Trajano. His doctorate in performing arts is about this art, having published the only Portuguese-language book about Decroux, mentioned above. Alexandre Brum Correa studied with Thomas Leabhart in Brazil and, abroad, graduated from the *École de Mime Corporel Dramatique* (London) with Corinne Soum and Steven Wasson, being part of *Théâtre de l'Ange Fou* as an actor and staying in training activities with them for seven years in total.
- ¹² Reference to a famous strophe in *Poema das sete faces* (Poem of seven faces), by one of the main modern Brazilian poets, Carlos Drummond de Andrade, published in his first book in 1930, in which he says: 'When I was born, a crooked angel of those who live in the shadows said: Go, Carlos! be Gauche in life' (our translation).
- ¹³ Acclaimed as one of the greatest Brazilian 7-string guitar virtuoso, he dedicated his career to rhythms like *seresta*, *samba* and *choro*, he died by Covid-19 in 08/08/2020 at the age of eighty.
- ¹⁴ LAPA/CNPq activities are carried in partnership with the Department of Performing Arts and the Scenic Arts post Graduation Program at UFMG. At the moment, Bya Braga develops, research on the physical scene and the Brazilian masking, with financial support from CNPq
- ¹⁵ BOBST Library, NY Public Library for the Performing arts, Brooklyn NY Public Library, as well as the collection of NYU's own Department of Perfor-

mance Studies and other institutions such as Moma, New School and Carnegie Hall, where Decroux performed.

- ¹⁶ The artistic practice of re-enactments is evident through contemporary dance studies since the late 1980s by Mark Franko, Rebecca Schneider and André T. Lepecki (2011; 2016), inter-relating history, dance, visual arts and performance.
- ¹⁷ The relationship of the notion of artisanship with the art Corporeal Mime can be seen in Bya Braga's book about the Decroux (2013), where this notion enters into dialogue with studies by Canclini (1998), Sennett (2009), Mills (2009) and Bataille (1980; 1988).
- ¹⁸ Leabhart described in his book (2007), a detailed step-by-step transcription of the piece, which is performed differently according to *l Ange Fou's* own transmission, as Leabhart suppressed in his transcription an important part of Decroux's creation. This could signal different transmissions performed by Decroux himself at different times, or perhaps different styles created by former students, such as the Leabhart's Californian school.
- ¹⁹ Fortunately, there is the possibility to access some of its issues. See: <https://scholarship.claremont.edu/mimejournal/>
- ²⁰ It is a study of the movement encroached in Leabhart's pedagogy, based on dressing a garment which follows a rigid structure of movements decoupage changing level dynamics and direction to each framed action.
- ²¹ Please, see: <https://www.berkeleyside.com/2016/05/09/how-quirky-is-berkeley-the-many-passions-of-leonard-pitt>
- ²² Hammers were given as trophies to winners of American indoors rowing competitions.
- ²³ Daniel J. Boine's 2005 book 'Red Rose Crew: A true story of women, winning and the water', is based on Carie Graves rowing career.
- ²⁴ See also Barba & Savarese, 1995 where the authors expose how it is still treated as 'scandalous' performative compositions that does not aim to a clear public understanding, that is to say, proposing another logic of creative process and relationship with an audience.
- ²⁵ We contacted De Marinis by email in August 2018 asking for his support. He informed us that he was retiring from University of Bologna and, thus, could not forward the request.

- ²⁶ Regarding training review in the current transmission carried out by the masters Soum and Wasson, considered by us as living archives, we gathered valued results which we intend to share in the foreseen future.
- ²⁷ Please check: <http://www.angefou.co.uk/historyofourbuilding.html>
- ²⁸ The use of the word *envision* refers to the entry, 'Visions', written by theatrical theorist Ferdinando Taviani (Barba & Savarese, 1995), in which he comments on the independent views of an actor's logic within a creative process, looking into the actor's acting. Such understanding seems to us paramount for the achievement of an actor's laboratory behavior that is not based, *a priori*, in the search for meanings in his work for the benefit of verbal communication, clearly understood by the public.
- ²⁹ MOVEO Physical Theater and Corporeal Mime School, based in Barcelona, Spain, was founded in 2005 by members of the that group.
- ³⁰ The Table piece was originally created by Thomas Leabhart and Steven Wasson in the second half of the 1970s in the US and belongs to post-modern Corporeal Mime repertoire.

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