

# Dilating time for found spaces

*Marina Marcondes Machado*

Neo-realist reality is incomplete, formal and above all, reasonable, but the poetry, the mystery, all that completes and enlarges tangible reality is missing. “The most remarkable thing about fantasy”, said André Breton, “is that it doesn’t exist”.

Luis Buñuel, *Poetry and Cinema*

1.

This paper will cover the work in process of five students that attended, during four months, classes that discussed the meaning of children playing and its relations to the space, as well as the philosophy of the poetics’ of miniatures, like in a doll’s house, as Bachelard (1994) proposed. The aim of this study was to find out theatricality in spaces big and small inside a City Park in Belo Horizonte, Minas Gerais (Brazil). As the students were capable of finding scenic elements over the space, they understood something about the contemporary scene, the possibilities of spatial dramaturgies, and its freedom from having to tell a story in the traditional way. They also learned that performing is something that, nowadays, does not have to take place in a building called “Theater”.

Our methodology was quite close to what Kincheloe & Berry (2004) called “bricolage”. Each student was invited to choose a place in the Park, in which he or she would make an installation with miniature objects, such as twigs, leaves, pebbles, empty containers and small boxes, household found items, broken little toys, etc. The process of choosing the space and materials, and also of creating the installation, was discussed and registered, which constituted an initial, but important, act of practical ethnography. We didn’t know previously what was going to happen there: we were deeply dedicated to the work in process creation and the possibilities that the installations could open.<sup>1</sup>

I created the expression “found spaces” to refer not only to the specific sites chosen by the students, but also to reveal the point of view of the passers-by who would eventually pay attention to the installations. For “dilated times” I understand a quality of time such as that found in the as-if playing of the small children: “all the world’s time”, one could say. Both statements led us to the *potential space*, as conceived by Winnicott – a psychic area of creativity and joy in between people:

<sup>1</sup> I am sure that this search speaks directly to Grotowski when he said: «I don’t want to discover something new but something forgotten» (Grotowski *apud* Schechner, 2004).

I have tried do draw attention to the importance both in theory and in practice of a third area, that of play, which expands into creative living and into the whole cultural life of man. This third area has been contrasted with inner or personal psychic reality and the actual world in which the individual lives, which can be objectively perceived. I have located this important area of *experience* in the potential space between the individual and environment, that which initially both joins and separates the baby and the mother [...] [Winnicott, 1994, p. 102-103].

So in one afternoon in the month of January 2013 (Summer in Brazil), the students went to the Park, built their miniature installation at the chosen space. After that, their task – which was both simple and complex – was to be calm and quiet. They had to wait and see whether their installation would be noticed or not. If it wasn't noticed, that was one of the effects that could actually happen, and the students shouldn't mind. We focused on the passer-by in the Park that afternoon, and not in our own desires or some preconceived theory: «immensity is the movement of motionless man. It is one of the dynamics characteristics of quiet daydreaming» [Bachelard, 1994, p. 184]. From the students' point of view, to stay “calm and quiet” was a very hard achievement! (They are very young people, around their 20's). But they made it. I consider that acting “calm and quiet” (instead of calling people to notice our work for example) is a conduct specially connected with Rancière's (2012) way of thinking, an author who tells us that the contemporary spectator is emancipated: the spectator himself makes his choices, if he is going or not going to participate, to get involved or not; he enjoys and responds to the different stimuli that cultural life offers to him, in his very own way. Rancière's insight invites the performer to stay “calm and quiet”, rather than to attempt to ask the public to notice him or her. Staying “calm and quiet” also presentifies the dramaturgy of space: there isn't a story to tell, nor an actor to lead the spectator to an emotion or thought. The installation was supposed to provoke something colored by rich theatricality: «the communicability of an unusual image is a fact of great ontological significance» [Bachelard, 1994, p. XVII].

The bricolage provides a beginning framework for helping all people in all ways of life construct systems of meaning-making. Such systems grant us ways of producing knowledge that help us make sense of our species' past as well as our own personal past. Such knowledge empowers us to construct a more equitable, exciting, just, and intelligent future.

Kincheloe & Berry, *Rigour and Complexity in Education Research*

2.

The five students did not accept the procedure easily; I had to ask them to give it a chance, which meant to look forward to seeing what could happen, betting on the capacity of common people to “read” our installations. There were no explicit

signs, no inductive conduct: the students had to keep in silence – something quite simple but hard to achieve, something that I compared to a *zen* practice, because they had to empty themselves of expectations, letting the moment last (dilated time). I was asking them to sink into Bachelard's way: «At times when we believe we are studying something, we are only being receptive to a kind of day-dreaming [...]» [Bachelard, 1994, p. XXXVIII].

I prepared them to do so for several weeks, and the practice itself took something like four hours. The preparing consisted in reading texts about children's psychology and imagining the kind of freedom that their future pupils would have in theatre classes outside classrooms, connected to the concept of "dilated times", so that theater practice can be read as something that happens on open spaces, where anyone can come in, specially in public spaces. The challenge was also to research something that could be called a "non-theatre":<sup>2</sup> to make it happen, it was necessary to live the experience of dilated temporality, and the student had to try to be somehow invisible; but, if they overtried... it wouldn't happen! They were asked to donate visibility to the space and enjoy the time for creation, observing the world around them. They should be quiet so that the musicality of the others would come out to them. The Park itself evoked «many variations on the theme of this limitless world»: a «primary attribute of forests», as said Bachelard.

The results were just amazing. I believe that the students were, after all, able to comprehend that «knowing must [...] be accompanied by an equal capacity to forget knowing. Non-knowing is not a form of ignorance but a difficult transcendence of knowledge» [Bachelard, 1994, pp. XXXII-III].

I begun to call this proposition a "theater for shy people". The shiest student of my group chose a hole next to the floor to construct his installation. He hid a broken toy inside the hole, among other objects, and this place happened to be an opening

<sup>2</sup> Saying so connects with Allan Kaprow's concept of "Un-Art": «I gradually eliminated most of these beliefs by doing events only once, by not sending out announcements, by shifting event sites from artists' lofts and underground galleries to remote landscapes or to multiple sites that were out of touch with one another; as well as by encouraging people to select their own sites and times. The wheather and insects were occasionally involved. Flexibility of time allowed passengers on transatlantic trips to calculate their doings based on changes in time zones. The biggest problem, however, was the presence of audience at Happenings. [...] But that strategy wasn't enough. Leaving galleries, museums, and professional art circles for woods, alleys, public bathrooms, and supermarket aisles could hardly erase my role as a former painter in the New York art scene of the 40s and 50s. It was like rejecting a labour union membership. [...] But I took a cue from stories of monastic practices in which dissatisfied persons, seeeking the proverbial meaning of life, give up the real world and its temptations for a presumed spiritual, and better, one. Could this be done in art without physically going into a monk's cell for life? I thought it could and called it "un-arting". Essentially, this was accomplished by taking the art out of the art, which in practical terms meant discarding art's characteristics. This allowed me to retain my membership in the art community while leaving it. Leaving art is art» [Kaprow, 2003, pp. XXVIII-XXIX].

for his own boyish imagination. A passer-by boy communicated silently with him, finding the hidden toy... as simple as that.

The hole as a chosen space, mixing emptiness and fullness, happened to be an excellent resume for the contents' of the *Dilated time for found spaces* project.

In this reverberation,  
the poetic image will have  
a sonority of being.

Gaston Bachelard, *Poetics of Space*

3.

January 23rd, 2013; as the afternoon went by, the students had good surprises. As we imagined, the people open enough to see and enjoy the installations were mostly children; some adults were curious, but in a very obtuse and distrustful way. Other adults would reprimand their kids, yelling at them, saying that those objects were dirty and “full of germs”! A young man asked a student: «Is this art?» A garbage man actually said: «This is art» and asked a little child not to put his hands on it. This was an unintended situation. Perhaps it arose because some other students had made installations in the Park in the previous days, and we might suppose that these students had asked children not to touch their installations, and the garbage man was just echoing these requests. It was curious how the young students faced those facts; it was difficult for them to maintain the “zen” attitude, especially when someone else felt like giving orders... like the garbage man did.



We had a good talk after that, and I explained to the students that in that kind of situation they had to be open to every type of conduct. Their role was that of an observer, accepting the phenomena, searching for all kinds of meanings that people would give to the installations in the specific sites they had chosen. Their focus had to be on the site viewers! I wish that, for the next time, they will prepare their installations based upon this previous experience; searching, in the Bachelard's way, some kind of an universal vocabulary of space, looking for «the very ecstasy of the newness of image» [Bachelard, 1994, p. XV]. Imagining textures and concatenations, always approaching concrete reality, will enable the students to practice the “consciousness of enlargement” [*ibid.*].

The connection between a floating feather, a stone that rolls, and a ball on a plane only becomes intelligible through the construction of the idea of falling, a construction which presupposes the finding of a tree fall and the analysis of facts. Therefore, science only exists after the construction of ideal models which permit the assimilation of different phenomena.

Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Child Psychology and Pedagogy*

4.

The five students prepared their final reports in a very careful way. I asked them to use at least three boxes with images: for the first box, they should choose an image of the specific site of their installation at the City Park; for the second box, they had to do illustrate their own concept of miniature and show the chosen materials; and the third box was supposed not to have an image at all. It was the portrait of emptiness.<sup>3</sup> It was the portrait of the invisibility and the impossibility of capturing the now-and-here moment of a creative discovery. It was also the commitment of «rigour in the absence» [Kincheloe, 2004]: a form of a new rigour that reveals unique perspectives which turns out to be ways of viewing the world – lenses for the lived human experience in a Summer afternoon that can help to construct new systems in the future of our mutual scholars' paths.

I told them that they were “donating theatricality”; to donate theatricality is to organize some kind of experience that will communicate with others in an affective/effective way – something that didn't involve money and focused on the spectator as the passer-by, which is, a common person in a common place, that might recognize it or not.

<sup>3</sup> Emptiness is a word that walks along with solitude. I am sure that the students would clearly understand this quote of Grotowski: «I am interested in the actor because he is a fellow human being... which means my encounter with a person other than myself, the feeling, the contact, the sense of mutual comprehension created by the fact that we are both opening ourselves to another human being, that we are trying to understand him and thus overcome our solitude». Paul Allain, *Obituary: Jerzy Grotowski*, «The Independent»: <<http://www.independent.co.uk/arts-entertainment/obituary-jerzy-grotowski-1074849.html>>, accessed on 07/13/2013.





I believe that the best bet lies on the knowledge that the spectator (and also the non-actor) already has about theater, performance, art and life; this kind of thought connects to Paulo Freire's work: «the teacher is of course an artist, but being an artist does not mean that he or she can make the profile, can shape the students. What the educator does in teaching is to make it possible for the students to become themselves» [Freire, 1990].

The following text was written by a student in her final report and it is a nice example of the research of "being one's self":



A theater that is careful with the invisible opens doors and windows in the everyday theater classroom, aerating the air, leaving it circulate, allowing a renewal of paradigms. The choice of non-narrative and the dissolution stage-audience, disrupts fixed structures sometimes asphyxiant, giving place to the nonlinear, non-narrative, chaos and another spatial conception. That conception of space permeates physical, relational and philosophical spheres: I give space so that the other can mess, can play with my own conceptions about art, allowing that the other one reinvents its own notion of what would theater be to himself. What could the student say about himself and the world through his manner of playing theater? [Raísa Campos, *Final report*, 2013]

Raísa chose a kind of vegetable patch, a wall covered by grass, to create, over there, her installation. She conceived an installation that evoked *Alice in the Wonderland*. The grass in the wall seemed to present some kind of a sacred space, and the organization of materials that she made was special and enigmatic. There was only a bored boy who was brave enough to get close to it. Maybe next time she will mix sacred and profane's way of being in her spatial dramaturgy creation.

Samuel is the name of the student that decided picking a hole: transition in between inside and outside; an opening; a focal point. Raysner chose a lunette, an evocation of "being under" (a bridge with the round-arch, with a design in mosaic) as well as the sense of "being over". Those intentions spoke directly to the children in the playground, and his installation was the most visited one.



Lucas went for a piece of floor... which reproduced a chessboard, revealing a quite conceptual choice. Ana chose a blue climbing frame; a fragment of that was used as a box, delineating her experiment. They were all in the playground of the City Park: the urban environment provided the area for social interaction, our “potential space”. The chosen spaces were the doors to access imaginative capacities, and I figured out meaningful relations in between the student and the spatialities they had chosen; as searching for a poetic of their own, the five students dreamed their research on something that lies in between experiment and experience:

[...] the bricoleur becomes a sailor on troubled waters, navigating a course that traces the journey between scientific and the moral, the relationship between the quantitative and the qualitative, and the nature of social, cultural, psychological and educational insight. All of these travels help bricoleurs overcome the limitations of monological reductionism while taking on account the new vistas opened by the multilogical [Kincheloe & Berry, 2004, p. 4].

Now I shall discuss an important feature of playing.  
This is that in playing, and perhaps only in playing,  
the child or adult is free to be creative.

D. W. Winnicott, *Playing and Reality*

5.

I believe that during the one-term graduate seminar those five students learned something about creative activity and the search of the self [Winnicott, 1994]. Now they are able to observe in detail the conditions that a space offers for establishing relationships in between space and dramaturgy, in a very odd way: no preconceived need of words and instructions. I hope this will lead them, from now on, to open up their concept of theatricality and engage in different kinds of theatre classes; this speaks very closely to the researches on contemporary art and the relations in between theatre, playing and life itself. As the students understand that, they become more creative and capable of accepting the precariousness of our duty: teaching something that mixes subjectivity and objectivity, towards a significant experience of inventing new worlds.

To do so, the students must go on practicing ethnographic ways of thinking and living intensely the (non)theatrical experiments; at a second moment, they have to learn how to study their own observations. Accurate appointments about the relations in between the passers-by and the installations might become theoretical thought about teaching art and theatre, in the sense of dramaturgies of space.

Those five students just began their researching path, beautifully registered in their final reports. We shall continue this work in a study group that I will command, called “Own Poetics Workshop”. I am sure that this practice of ethnography of dilated time for found spaces’ experiments will lead them to a great research



field, according to the right of being who they are: in this sense the students will connect on their true selves as future theatre teachers, beginning with this moment that valorized strategies of fieldwork, creation and writing. To do so, we can start asking the kind of question that Kincheloe & Berry (2004) purpose: «What is the nature of living a good life? In this ethical domain bricoleurs question the ways their research contribute to social good. How does this work influence the lives of the researcher, the community, the world?»

#### References

- Gaston Bachelard, *The Poetics of Space*, Beacon Press, Boston 1994.
- James Clifford, George E. Marcus, *Writing Culture. The Poetics and Politics of Ethnography*, University of California Press, London 1986.
- Paulo Freire, Myles Horton, *We make the road by walking. Conversations on Education and Social Change*, Temple University Press, Philadelphia 1990.
- Jerzy Grotowski, Ludwik Flaszen, *O Teatro Laboratório de Jerzy Grotowski 1959-1969. Textos e materiais de Jerzy Grotowski e Ludwic Flaszen com um escrito de Eugenio Barba*, Perspectiva, SESC, Fondazione Pontedera Teatro, São Paulo, Pontedera 2007.
- Allan Kaprow, *Essays on the blurring of art and life*, University of California Press, London 2003.
- Joe Kincheloe, Kathleen B. Berry, *Rigour and Complexity in Education Research. Conceptualizing the bricolage*, Open University Press, London 2004.
- Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Child Psychology and Pedagogy*, The Sorbonne Lectures 1949-1952, Northwestern University Press, Evanston 2010.
- Jacques Rancière, *O espectador emancipado*, Martins Fontes, São Paulo 2012.
- Richard Schechner, *The Future of Ritual: Writings on Culture and Performance*, Routledge, London 1993.
- Donald Woods Winnicott, *Playing and Reality*, Tavistock/Routledge, London and New York 1994.

Photos by Lucas Fabrício de Araujo, January 2013, Belo Horizonte, Brazil.