

Performance as an intimate encounter

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Since 2002, I have been experimenting and developing performance-based projects designed as one-to-one encounters (or for a very small group of people), rather than for a broad audience/public — i.e. a set of people who watch an event. In some of these performances, there is no recording of the event, given that its context is based on an environment of confidentiality, discretion and empathy. There may be some images or descriptions of what has happened, but there is no access to what really took place, between the performer and the participant.

I'm very interested in the spaces of inter-human relationships. These spaces may be physical or architectural, or spaces which are created via communication-based media. They may all be spaces for intimacy, empathy, desire and fantasy. For example, in the case of communication-based media, this space also involves a fascination with technology, since it contains an (almost) magical dimension: making that which is distant, appear to be physically close. On the other hand, I'm not interested in carrying on the performances on stage, in the classical sense of the term, since it is usually a hierarchical space, and I aim at establishing relationships and connections that subvert hierarchies, constructed in a rhizomatic manner, transversally crossing a number of issues that are important to me, as both an individual and an artist.

There are several concepts related to intimacy that are significant within my work: limit (or confinement) — in the physical, conceptual or psychological sense; impossibility — as a limit or restriction imposed by the person himself or by others; violence — as an exercise of visible or invisible force; affection and desire.

Intimacy — a definition:

“1.

- a. *The state of being personally intimate; intimate friendship or acquaintance; familiar intercourse; close familiarity; an instance of this.*
 - b. *euphem. for sexual intercourse.*
 - c. *Closeness of observation, knowledge, or the like.*
2. *Intimate or close connexion or union, rare.*

Pertaining to the inmost thoughts or feelings; proceeding from, concerning, or affecting one's inmost self; closely personal.

Close in acquaintance or association; closely connected by friendship or personal knowledge; characterized by familiarity (with a person or thing); very familiar. Said of persons, and personal relations or attributes. Also transf. of things, Pertaining to or dealing with such close personal relations.

Familiarly associated; closely personal.

Of a theatrical performance, esp. a revue: that aims at establishing familiar and friendly relations with the audience. Also of a theatre itself.

Of knowledge or acquaintance: Involving or resulting from close familiarity; close.”¹

Being intimate with someone always involves a certain degree of physical, psychological or spiritual proximity. But one can also refer to artistic proximity, in the case of the relationship between actors and the public in a theatrical performance, or in the theatre auditorium, that enables the audience to draw close to the characters, physically and psychologically.

In Portuguese, the meaning of ‘intimate’, notwithstanding its Latin root — *intimus* — is substantially broader. Something which is intimate, may be an intuition (an inner voice that tells us the path to follow), a quality (to be intimately good or bad) a physical or chemical action (something that penetrates or acts inside bodies, in their molecules). The meanings that particularly interest me are the following:

- “5. Having a very close relationship with someone; being united with someone by affection and trust.
6. Taking place between a small number of family members or with

¹ Oxford English Dictionary, available at: <http://www.oed.com/>, viewed on 28-01-2009.

persons who have a close relationship. Dinner +; ceremony, party +.
7. Providing or evoking physical or sentimental proximity, creating or enabling intimacy.
8. Relating to each person; which is not public, is not shown. ~ PERSONAL, PRIVATE.”²

Being intimate may mean to foster an encounter between a small group of like-minded people, or create a situation that enables intimacy to arise. But also something that is personal or private. The notion of private is essential in this regard, since something private “is not public or has no public character; which is not accessible to everyone”, that to which the State doesn’t have access, or which doesn’t concern the State, as well as that which “develops apart; that is reserved to certain people. A private meeting. A private audience. A private session, or that which takes place without the involvement of third parties”.³

Intimacy allows people to reveal feelings, emotions or secret personal stories. This degree of confidentiality may occur between people who are close, but the opposite may also happen, although this is not very common, i.e. we may meet a stranger to whom we may reveal something that is highly personal. We can also think about professional intimacy — in the framework of which professional services are provided that require confidentiality (as in the cases of medicine, psychotherapy or legal counsel).

Two keywords in terms of intimacy are ‘proximity’ and ‘empathy’. To be close to someone makes us feel more human, for we share a presence, we share something with another being or a group of special individuals. In this manner, we share proximity, in terms of time, space, situation and psychological state. We have to be in contact and remain close. There is a link that may be ephemeral or that may be developed at the level of psychological investment and involvement. Feeling empathy towards someone is also to feel close and understand another person’s emotions,

² *Dicionário da Língua Portuguesa Contemporânea da Academia das Ciências de Lisboa, (Dictionary of Contemporary Portuguese Language of the Academy of Sciences), Academia das Ciências de Lisboa and Editorial Verbo, Lisbon, 2001, II Volume G-Z, p. 2146.*

³ *Dicionário da Língua Portuguesa Contemporânea da Academia das Ciências de Lisboa, 2001, p. 2964.*

being able to put yourself in someone else's shoes. To be able to feel intimate with someone, or with a small group of people, often makes us feel special. We feel that we are part of something unique, that cannot be replicated, and this may give us a sense of protection, which is important for unveiling feelings. Vulnerability can be a form of self-revelation, which is often seen negatively, as a weakness.

Berlant suggests that intimacy is not a predictable zone, especially in terms of intimate institutions, which involve a private inner world and a public façade. What is seen from / in the exterior — regarding family relationships or close friendships — doesn't always coincide with that which is taking place within that relationship. Being in public may require a staging of ideal intimacy, wherein a different form of behaviour may lead to the assumption that the relationship is failing or has failed. To this effect, public life may become an unauthentic place, a place of power abuse.

Sharing and disclosing personal information is usually limited to an intimate situation, but an intimate interaction doesn't only concern conversational matters.

Intimate sharing may be verbal and / or nonverbal:

“Conceptions of intimate sharing have referred to both verbal and nonverbal behaviours (Reis & Shaver, 1988). Verbal sharing can involve self-disclosure of personal facts, opinions, and beliefs; it can also include emotional expressiveness. Nonverbal sharing can include a shared meaningful glance; an affectionate touch; shared emotional expression, such as tears or laughter; and shared sexuality. Some scholarly conceptions of intimate interaction have suggested that sharing must contain a "revelation" in order to be intimate (Beach & Tesser, 1988; Reis & Shaver, 1988). This view may unnecessarily eliminate such intimate moments as squeezing hands under the dinner table or gazing into the eyes of a beloved infant.”⁴

Another question related to intimate interaction is that of reciprocity. The complementary model of interaction is more prevalent in the artistic context, because the artist and participant who experience an intimate form of interaction don't have the same degree of knowledge about each other. However, the artist can subvert the roles and expectations in relation to the role played by each of them. Intimate

⁴ Karen J. Prager, *The psychology of intimacy*, Guilford Press, New York and London, 1995, p. 20.

interactions also have affective and cognitive-perceptual components:

“The affective component consists of positive involvement in, interest in, or feelings about oneself, the interaction, and the partner. The cognitive perceptual/component consists of each partner's perception that there is an understanding between partners.”⁵

If we think about artworks that involve intimate interactions, we can question whether this interaction may lead to an intimate relationship between artist and participant. What will be the boundary between an intimate interaction and a relationship? When may we consider that a relationship constitutes an intimate relationship? For Prager, at an initial level, an intimate relationship is “one in which intimate interactions occur on a regular and predictable basis”. For this to happen, repetition is an important factor: “There is a history of repeated intimate interactions and each partner in the relationship may presume and expect intimate interactions with others, at acceptable intervals.” The author introduces us to the term “relational intimacy”, referring to the “presence of frequent intimate interactions between the partners in a relationship.”⁶ An intimate relationship — such as a friendship or a romantic relationship — involves a different temporal duration than a one-off interaction — but also requires that the persons involved are connected by a degree of trust, common interests and shared emotions — such as affection or love. These relationships don't only imply time, but also space. For example, the intensity of interactions may increase to the point where two or more individuals decide to share a house or a work space. This may be temporary — e.g. a long vacation or a romantic relationship in which one of the persons involved has another stable relationship — or more permanently — such as when a couple decides to live together, or even when two friends open a business together.

Intimacy can exist in different ways: in a more ephemeral or one-off manner, or may be built up progressively, through the development of empathy, trust, sharing and proximity: but will expire as soon as the consensual dimension

⁵ Karen J. Prager, 1995, pp. 21-22.

⁶ Karen J. Prager, 1995, p. 23.

disappears.

Performance as an intimate encounter in Portugal

I will list several works by artists working within the field of the performing arts, who have developed projects in Portugal, designed for a single person or a small group of people:

***Seres solitários* (Solitary beings) by Lúcia Sigalho (1999)**

A series of individual performances in which the artist aimed to question the limits of theatrical practice itself, by asking “when does theatre exist?”. As Clara Riso noted, for Lucia Sigalho “theatre occurs when there is an actor and a spectator.”⁷ Confronted with a single spectator each time, this situation tests these minimum conditions:

“The need to establish a link between the actor and the spectator, the desire to create theatre with the public, rather than the public leading her to express on stage [Gaspar] her conviction that ‘the people who create theatre are all those in the room’ rather than an audience that insists on closing the communication pathways. The actor isn’t, and doesn’t want to be, a television screen, imperturbable and impenetrable, but, on the contrary, expects from the public the interpretation of the role he has to play, within construction of the performance.”⁸

***Danças privadas* (Private dances) by Francisco Camacho (2000)⁹**

In *Danças Privadas* the spectator has been given the freedom to choose, in advance, the costume and the dance music that Francisco would create, in exchange for a payment (a commission fee included in the ticket), which included the delivery of a co-production certificate to each participant, at the end of the performance.

⁷ Clara Riso in *Cem horas de conversa* (One hundred hours of conversation) 2002, available at: http://www.c-e-m.org/producao/iniciativas/cemhoras/lucia_sigalho.htm, viewed on 08-02-2013.

⁸ Clara Riso, 2002.

⁹ *Danças Privadas* (Private Dances) — Conception and Interpretation: Francisco Camacho; Assistant: Pietro Romani; Executive Producer: Paula Pereira; Production Secretary: Paula Caruço; Administration: EIRA — Company subsidised by the Ministry of Culture/Instituto das Artes.

***Rua de Sentido Único* (One Way Street), Mónica Calle (2003)**

A monologue presented to two spectators per session, held in Casa Conveniente. The scenario reproduced the room of a standard boarding house (*pensão*), with a huge bed. The two spectators were invited to sit down, or lie upon the bed, and Monica then turned off the light, put on some music and smoked a cigarette. Next she began to speak in the dark. The texts that she read were written by several authors, but were linked together, as if they constituted a single text: Walter Benjamin, Samuel Beckett, Al Berto, amongst others. At the end, Monica would lay down on the bed with her spectators.

***Only You*, by Dinis Machado (2011)**

A project in which the artist received spectators in a space, to which he had moved the entire contents of his bedroom. Subject to prior booking,¹⁰ the audience was asked to choose one of six short films, that served as a backdrop for reading a text (*The Human Voice* by Jean Cocteau). This act was recorded using a video camera and subsequently the viewer received the corresponding footage in the post.

In all these works there is a performance, and reiterating the words of Lúcia Sigalho, you only require an actor and a spectator in order to create a performance. A fictional space is created that does not pertain to everyday life and, although it isn't a theatre play, nonetheless it questions about theatre and dance, as disciplines that may expand and hybridize. However, there is still a dramatic text involved in these works, as well as a dancer or actor playing a role, a spectator who may have greater or lesser degree of intervention, a production team, and a ticket office.

While it's often difficult to write about performance in the field of the visual arts in Portugal, it's even harder to write about practices that, by their nature, often do not admit or include the most common modes of documentation. This difficulty stems

¹⁰ Providing the 24-hour phone number 938 243 761.

from several factors: the first is an almost inexplicable lack of criticism on the subject — art critics rarely write about performance in general and those theatre or dance critics who sometimes do this, in substitution of the former, don't always approach these practices from the viewpoint of the visual arts specificities. The second reason is related to the absence of an archive or documentation centre in Portugal dedicated to performance, such as, for example, *The Live Art Development Agency*¹¹ in London. All these factors led me to start the *To Perform* blog in April 2008, which is intended to be an informal platform in order to disseminate, discuss and archive performances and performance-based practices by Portuguese artists. Since its launch, the blog has organised regular publications, lists of artists, the possibility of accessing images or videos, guaranteeing links to other websites that contain information or documentation on performances. The last factor is the extremely limited academic research on the subject. Only very recently have there been artistic disciplines in higher education dedicated to the topic of performance in the visual arts and also very few master's or doctoral theses have been presented on this topic. The first was by Isabel Carlos — *Performance ou a Arte num Lugar Incómodo (Performance or Art in an Uncomfortable Place)* — wherein she jocularly refers to the moment when she had to defend her thesis in 1992, as follows:

“[...] I was doing an MA in Media Studies at the Universidade Nova, which resulted in a thesis on *Performance* which was called “*Performance or Art in an Uncomfortable Place*”, a topic that was by no means obvious in Portugal in 1988. When the time came to defend my thesis, the director, very appropriately, arranged a Spanish examiner because there was no one who could oversee this task in Portugal.”¹²

Due to this lack of documentation, I published a note in the discussion list,

¹¹ <http://www.thisisliveart.co.uk/index.html>

¹² Helena Vasconcelos, “Isabel Carlos - O Exercício da Inteligência” (Isabel Carlos – The Exercise of Intelligence) in *Storm*, Lisbon, 27 October 2005, available at: <http://www.storm-magazine.com/novodb/arqmais.php?id=650&sec=&secn=>, viewed on 08-02-2013.

*Arena*¹³ asking Portuguese artists, or foreign artists resident in Portugal, to send me their own ideas and/or documentation on the subject. Several people responded to this request, but almost all of the responses strayed from the initial topic, except for the answers from the artist Carla Cruz, who sent me documentation concerning her performance in *Arco* (Madrid), and the artist André Sousa, who suggested that I contact Susana Chiocca and Nuno Ramalho, who had developed projects in this field, including the following:

Fiasco, by Nuno Ramalho (2004)¹⁴

In the performance-based show, entitled *Quando um minuto se arrasta* (*When a minute drags on*) held at the Salão Olímpico, in 2004, Nuno Ramalho stood alone, blindfolded, in the central courtyard of the Salão Olímpico. One person entered at a time, and as soon as he sensed their presence, the artist gestured for them to come closer. As soon as he felt them getting close, he took the person to the wall enclosing the courtyard and then whispered in their ear: “Desculpa” (Sorry).

* IMAGE * *Fiasco*, by Nuno Ramalho, Salão Olímpico, 2004.

Then, he led the person back to the centre of the courtyard and they remained in silence. The person stayed as long as he wanted, and only after he left would a new participant enter. This occurred, successively, with all the people who wanted to be with Nuno. The only records of the performance were some low-quality night shots, due to the distance and discretion with which they were taken.

¹³ A *Arena* is a non-moderated discussion thread, in Portuguese, on art and technology, which has existed since 1999 and is coordinated by Miguel Leal and Fernando José Pereira, available at: <http://www.virose.pt/arena/>

¹⁴ *Fiasco*, by Nuno Ramalho, Salão Olímpico, Porto, 23 April, 2004, from 23:00

Conversas Privadas (Private Conversations), by Susana Chiocca, (2005) ¹⁵

* IMAGE* *Conversas Privadas*, Susana Chiocca , 2005.

The first place where the performance was held¹⁶ was a goods container, in the group exhibition, *Toxic*, curated by Paulo Mendes. The space was empty, stripped of any item of furniture, object or prop. No recording was made of what took place inside, at the artist's decision, since she didn't want there to be any factors that would inhibit the participants, beyond the situation itself. On the other hand, the idea of a private meeting was maintained, which would only be preserved in the memory of those who took part. The picture that we see here was staged — for the purposes of dissemination of the event. In *Private conversations*, orality wasn't the preferred means of contact. Susana wanted to “meet with and/or in the other”, to undertake “approaches that don't signify knowledge,” but instead use “energies that pass and pierce, that transpire and penetrate”. Between herself and the participant there were “silences, gestures, imitations, touches or quasi-touches.”

Documenting my performance-based practice

Several of my art projects don't intend to produce an 'object' and don't occur in a 'public' sphere, but instead are produced via performance-based practices that re-use the idea of encounter, gesture and communication in the everyday world. Firstly, there is a re-examination of the meaning of being with others, in an intimate context. The performances always aim to offer a genuine experience of being with or creating a connection with someone — I want to be with people by sharing knowledge or cultural memory. All performance-based actions – that constitute performance — are different with each participant, and for this reason the concept of

¹⁵ *Conversas Privadas (Private Conversations)* by Susana Chiocca, *TOXIC, O Discurso do Excesso (The Discourse of Excess)* (#1), *TERMINAL* Project, Hangar K7, Oeiras, 2 September 2005, from 21:30 to 01:30.

¹⁶ There was another presentation of this performance in Oslo, inserted in the *Supermarket* exhibition, in the Galleri Seilduken, curated by Margarida Paiva.

the audience (in its classical sense) is not operational in this context. I'm interested in thinking and reflecting about how it's possible to create intimacy between two people (who may be complete strangers) in a specific context. But also thinking about the 'operations' that must be implemented in order to produce this encounter.

a bedtime story (2007)

* IMAGE * *a bedtime story*, picture of the invitation.

The performance took place in the framework of *INTIMACY - Across Visceral and Digital Performance*.¹⁷ For *a bedtime story*, it was decided, in conjunction with the directors, Maria X [aka Maria Chatzichristodoulou] and Rachel Zerihan, that the following description should appear in the programme's website:

"A Bedtime Story by Susana Mendes Silva (Portugal /UK)
The artist will tell a bedtime story to everyone who would like to hear one. Participants are asked to send an e-mail to arslonga@netcabo.pt or call 07964291286 to schedule the date and the time you would like to hear your story. You can choose if the story is told to you in English or Portuguese and you must have Skype (or arrange to have it before your story). Maximum time: 30 minutes. From 10pm each night of 7, 8, 9 December."

It was also decided that, in addition to the information in the programme, there would be a blog for the project, in which it would be possible to consult the times that had already been booked, as well as instructions and various links related to the project. In the blog ¹⁸ it was announced that I would tell a story to everyone who wanted to listen to me. A selection of the stories that I read was produced by a group of friends to whom I sent a message asking the following: "if anyone read you a story, what would you like it to be?". I also chose several stories that I would like to have

¹⁷ A 3-day meeting, that included seminars, performances and a symposium, held in London, at Goldsmiths, Laban, The Albany, Home and online, between 7 and 9 December.

¹⁸ <http://a-bedtime-story.blogspot.pt/>

read to me. Although the structure of each performance was similar, the result was always slightly different, due to the interaction with each participant. In general, in the first few minutes, we talked a bit, in order to ensure that the ideal environment was created in each person's home and that everything was working properly, from a technical perspective. Some people were accompanied by a friend or family member and they were asked to share the experience with them. When the story began to be read, I guided myself by the sounds of the movements, the breathing, a sigh.