



Notes on Jerzy Grotowski and Maud Robart's Researches on Afro-diasporic Chants

Luciano Matricardi¹ ^{II}

^IUniversidade Estadual de Maringá – UEM, Maringá/PR, Brazil

^{II}Universidade Federal do Estado do Rio de Janeiro – UNIRIO, Rio de Janeiro/RJ, Brazil

ABSTRACT – Notes on Jerzy Grotowski and Maud Robart's Researches on Afro-diasporic Chants –

This paper discusses the transcultural investigations conducted by Jerzy Grotowski on traditional Afro-Diasporic chants. Based on some notes on the collaboration with the Haitian artist Maud Robart, it argues that these investigations were not aimed at the expropriation of traditional performative knowledge, the emptying of its meanings or the aestheticization of its forms. In its political dimension, as it seeks to delineate, it was a work that had the potential to relativize the usual modes of perception of the individual, especially the modern and western one, towards what could be called a 'decolonization of the self'.

Keywords: **Haitian Vodou. Transculturality. Theatre of Sources. Work on Oneself. Art as a Vehicle.**

RÉSUMÉ – Notes sur les Recherches de Jerzy Grotowski et Maud Robart sur les Chants Afro-

Diasporiques – Cet article traite des investigations transculturelles de Jerzy Grotowski sur les chants traditionnels afro-diasporiques. À partir de quelques notes sur la collaboration avec l'artiste haïtienne Maud Robart, nous cherchons à expliquer que de telles investigations ne visaient pas l'expropriation des savoirs performatifs traditionnels, la perte de ses significations et l'esthétisation de ses formes. Dans sa dimension politique, comme nous cherchons à le souligner, c'était une œuvre qui avait le pouvoir de relativiser les modes de perception habituels de l'individu, notamment moderne et occidental, vers ce qu'on pourrait appeler une 'décolonisation du soi'.

Mots-clés: **Vaudou Haïtien. Transculturalité. Théâtre des Sources. Le travail sur Soi. L'Art comme Véhicule.**

RESUMO – Apontamentos sobre as Pesquisas de Jerzy Grotowski e Maud Robart sobre os Cantos

Afrodiaspóricos – Este artigo trata das investigações transculturais de Jerzy Grotowski sobre os cantos tradicionais afrodiaspóricos. A partir de alguns apontamentos sobre a colaboração realizada com a artista haitiana Maud Robart, busca-se explicitar que tais investigações não estavam direcionadas à expropriação dos conhecimentos performativos tradicionais, ao esvaziamento de seus sentidos e à estetização de suas formas. Em sua dimensão política, conforme se busca evidenciar, tratava-se de um trabalho que tinha a potência de relativizar os modos de percepção habituais do indivíduo, principalmente daquele moderno e ocidental, na direção do que poderia ser chamada de uma 'descolonização do si mesmo'.

Palavras-chave: **Vodu Haitiano. Transculturalidade. Teatro das Fontes. Trabalho sobre Si. Arte como Veículo.**

Most commonly known for the theatrical performances produced with the Laboratory Theater in the 1960s¹, as well as for the world-famous publication of the 1965 book *Towards a Poor Theater*, the Polish artist Jerzy Grotowski extended his researches beyond the limits of conventional theater, investing in a long and systematic exploration of human possibilities in different performative contexts. His decision not to produce new spectacles, from the 1970s onwards, initiating the Paratheatre phase, aimed to expand the possibilities of *working on the self* – according to the notion inherited from Stanislavski – through laboratory propositions that abdicated both the fictional situation and the actor-spectator separation. From the phase of the Theatre of Sources, which began in 1976, this research was reoriented in the search for performative techniques that would enable the deconditioning of the individual's habitual perception and allow the achievement of a “direct perception” – we could call it a pre-predicative experience – which would be linked, according to Grotowski, to the organic nature of the being (Grotowski, 2016a, p. 168). It was at this stage that, together with a group of artists and performers of different origins and backgrounds, Grotowski made expeditions to Haiti, where he was in contact with the Vodou; to Nigeria, when in the company of a Haitian religious leader he visited the region of Ifé and Oshogbo (having observed the matrices of Yoruba and Ewe-Fon culture); to Mexico, where he was in contact with the Huichol indigenous people; and to India, in the region of Bengal, where he was in contact with the Baul (Slowiak; Cuesta, 2013). Until, already in the last stage of the artist's investigations, the so-called “art as a vehicle” (initiated with the opening of the Workcenter of Jerzy Grotowski, in 1986, in Italy), his work began to focus on traditional African and Afro-Caribbean chants, especially those of Haitian Vodou.

Still in the researches of the Theatre of Sources, Grotowski found that each of these chants could cause specific impacts on practitioners, not only for their stimulating or reassuring qualities, which would characterize a more simplistic and rudimentary level of the process, but also for countless other qualities that are located in a more subtle field of the perception and of the behaviors. He considered that the vibratory aspects of the chant, with the bodily impulses awakened by it, would update in the experience of the performer, in a direct way, the very meaning of the song (Grotowski, 2012,

p. 142-143). As he observed, each of these chants would have a particular dramatic aspect – linked to animal, human qualities or forces of nature – which would be encoded in the sound structure. Thus, the perception of these qualities would always take place in the body, through practice, in a process whose nature would be “completely different from playing a character” (Grotowski, 1995, p. 19).

In view of the historical strategies of commercialization of traditional knowledge or, of the so-called popular cultures, it is quite understandable – especially in Brazil, marked by such unequal ethnic-racial relations – that, at first glance, we have reservations regarding artistic processes, carried out by Europeans that interact with non-European cultural traditions. On the other hand, I seek to show that Grotowski’s transcultural investigation was not aimed at the expropriation of traditional knowledge, the emptying of its meanings and the aestheticization of its forms with a view to the production of artistic consumer goods. It was, in fact, an investigation carried out in the artistic field, whose experiential aspect is preponderant, which had the potency to relativize the usual *modes of perception* of the individual – mainly the modern and western one – through contact with other traditions and epistemologies. A work that, assuming the limits and dangers of an interaction of this nature, sought to exercise a decolonization of the subject’s *self*. To this end, I analyze part of the researches of Jerzy Grotowski and Maud Robart – Haitian artist and researcher who collaborated in the investigations of the Theatre of Sources, *Objective Drama* and of the *art as a vehicle* –, from the conceptual, practical and existential resonances found in Afro-diasporic epistemologies, as well as in dialogue with anthropology and ethnomusicology. It is also worth mentioning that this study was part of a broader research, carried out in the doctoral thesis (Matricardi, 2022), which involved the bibliographic review of Grotowski’s texts from the aforementioned period²; the reflection on the singing and acting practices that I experienced, between 2013 and 2020, with the artists of the Workcenter of Jerzy Grotowski and Thomas Richards; the interlocution with the readings and experiences around the religiosities of African matrix³; the bibliographical review of Maud Robart’s texts⁴ and the participation in the workshop *L’esprit du chant*, conducted by the Haitian artist, in 2019, in France.



Exchanges, intersections, and/or cultural intertwining have marked the development of modern and contemporary theater. Western artists, included and/or aligned with the Euro-American cultural tradition, such as Reinhardt, Stanislavski, Craig, Meyerhold, Tairov, Brecht, Artaud, Grotowski, Barba, Brook, Mnouchkine, Schechner, among others, have focused on techniques, languages and the philosophical and religious thought of non-Western traditions – Asian, African, Afro-diasporic and Amerindian, to name a few –, creating not only completely new theatrical forms, but also other ways of thinking/doing in creation. Such movements were and have been approached from the perspective of Interculturalism and Transculturalism and are also objects of analysis of Performance Studies, Ethnology and Theatrical Anthropology. The theoretical contributions to think about this diversity of cultural interactions have been explored by researchers such as Patrice Pavis, Rustom Bharucha, Erika Fischer-Lichte, Marco de Marinis, Josette Féral, Jean-Marie Pradier and Richard Schechner, to name a few.

The intercultural perspective, as addressed by Pavis (2008), starts from a semiotic conception of culture. Aligned with Clifford Geertz's anthropology, Pavis conceives culture as a system of signification, composed of norms and symbols, through which a group understands itself. In this understanding, it is the expression of social content that creates the aesthetic forms of the group – so that social practices and rituals, as well as philosophical and religious systems, would form modeling and textualities that would represent the ways of life of a given community. From such a conception, intercultural relations are then approached as adaptations and re-elaborations of the aesthetic modelizations of a culture-source to be received by the audience of a target culture. According to Pavis (2008), this relationship of “intercultural transfer” therefore requires adapters/translators to organize the passage from one universe to the other. As he explains, in such a process, the “[...] target culture analyzes and appropriates a foreign culture by filtering and highlighting certain cultural traits according to its own interests and assumptions” (Pavis, 2008, p. 5). The notion of appropriation, in this case, comes from the postulate that any translation – mostly linguistic – establishes a particular relationship between a culture of origin and another of arrival. In this context, it would be up to the translating artist to create a

“conducting body” between two cultures, respecting their proximities and distances, as well as their familiarities and strangeness (Pavis, 2008, p. 147). Although the author seems to try to overcome the representational paradigm by proposing an “energetic semiology” – in which the signs would be approached in their dynamic aspect and, through reinterpretation and reworking, could constitute as a “thought-in-action” (Pavis, 2008, p. 166) – his approach still seems to neglect social, religious and philosophical aspects of non-Western traditions in favor of their aesthetic dimensions.

Oposing this perspective, Fischer-Lichte (2009) observes that the notion of *intercultural performance* is usually linked to artistic creations that, even combining materials, languages and modes of action from different cultures, could still be identified as Euro-American performances. A process that, more or less consciously, tends towards a supposed Westernization and homogenization of such diverse references. For the researcher, a more interesting perspective of valuing diversity appears in the cultural intertwining that has occurred since the 1970s and that involves transcultural processes. According to her, in some of these processes a kind of community is created, an “intermediate state in which different identities are possible side by side” (Fischer-Lichte, 2009, p. 398). As she notes,

Of course, this kind of a community also has its political implications. For if, such a community can emerge in the space of theatre, why should it not be feasible in other places? And if, for the time being, it is in fact only possible in theatre, then theatre is to be regarded as a laboratory. Here, different ways are invented and tried out in interweaving cultures productively, and in exploring how to turn a crowd of individuals with very different cultural backgrounds into members of a – even if only temporary – community that does not demand that they hide or even give up their differences, and that does not include the one and excludes the other, but is able to render their differences productive for each and everybody participating (Fischer-Lichte, 2009, p. 398-399).

Based on Fischer-Lichte’s approach, we can say that Grotowski’s work at the Theatre of Sources was aimed precisely at creating these temporary communities. By looking at the diversity of ways of life, through the encounter of performative knowledge, exercising a sharper sensitivity, knowledge and transformation of its participants was proposed. In this context, we can say that performance was considered not only in its aesthetic

dimension, but mainly as a process that would reverberate in broader social and political transformations. This would happen, because by providing the encounter between individuals from different cultures, in intertwining processes that would result in something completely new, different possibilities of coexistence would be experienced.

Similarly, Fernando Mencarelli (2017) notes that, from the challenges launched by the “performative turn” and, later, by the “ontological turn”, many artistic experiences, including those of Grotowski, began to interact with different knowledge systems moving towards new epistemologies. This, according to the researcher, would have clear political implications if we consider that these new forms of socialization of art aimed to promote experiences about other “modes of perception” (Mencarelli, 2017, p. 5-6).

In Yoruba and Ewe-Fon epistemologies, from which Afro-Caribbean traditions descend, ritual songs are linked to specific divinities. They are modulations of vital forces whose artisanship is presented as vehicles for a particular perception of the world (Santos; Santos, 1993). Although these chants carry symbolic elements, their performativity is not centered on semiotic status, but rather on modes of agency in the corporeal experience of their practitioners (Goldman, 2005). It is especially in festivals, public rites, that this complex form of agency, between the different forces of life, is experienced in the body of practitioners. As proposed by Leda Maria Martins (2002, p. 72), in Afro-diasporic ritual performances, the body is

[...] a place of inscription of a knowledge that is encoded in gesture, movement, choreography, on the surface of the skin, as well as in the rhythms and timbres of vocality. What is repeated in the body and voice is an episteme. In orality performances, the gesture is not only a mimetic representation of a symbolic apparatus, conveyed by the performance, but it institutes and establishes the performance itself. Still, the gesture is not only narrative or descriptive, but fundamentally performative.

Thus, a rapprochement to these epistemologies – out of the ritual context – must presuppose at least an understanding of their original meanings and functions. Its artisanal dimension presupposes not only an aesthetic knowledge, but, above all, the activation and circulation of the forces involved in a given experience. Here, the forms are not detached from the forces. We could say, therefore, that an emptying of their original meanings

and functions would occur precisely from the representation of their foundations under solely aesthetic-formal aspects. And it was precisely in the contact with the epistemologies of African matrix (especially the Haitian Vodou), in which the possibility of modulation of the forces of life in processes of incarnation is affirmed, that Grotowski seems to have approached the effectiveness of Afro-diasporic chants in the corporeal-sensitive experience of performers of other origins. Based on the assumption that a performative technique carries within itself a vision of body and world, the articulation of these chants, outside the ritual context, was assumed in Grotowski's artistic research as an existential practice. Thus, his research took on an experiential character and was able to turn to issues that could hardly be framed solely in an aesthetic scope.

Considering the due particularities and distinctions of focus between anthropological, ethnomusicological research and Grotowski's transcultural approach, must be considered, however, a very similar research problem that seems pertinent to explore: the relationships between artistic forms, content and social context. As anthropologist Alfred Gell (2018) proposes, it is possible to include under the concept of art a series of objects and performative creations from non-western traditions if, in such approach, we analyze their aspects beyond the solely aesthetic scope. For, as the researcher clarifies, the technologies involved in artistic productions are always at the service of specific social interactions. Thus, in his theory

[...] anything could be treated as an art object from an anthropological point of view, including living people, because the anthropological theory of art (which we can roughly define as 'the social relations that take place in the surroundings of objects that act as mediators of social agency') fits perfectly with the social anthropology of people and their bodies. Thus, from the point of view of the anthropology of art, an idol in a temple that we believe to be the body of the deity and a medium offering the body of the deity temporarily are treated, in theoretical terms, on the same level, even if the former is an artifact and the latter a human being (Gell, 2018, p. 32).

In this way, Gell considers that the effectiveness of the art object is its power of agency and, in his theory, instead of emphasizing symbolic communication, he is more concerned with "the practical mediating role played by art objects in the social process". An approach that prioritizes, then, parameters such as intention, causality, result and transformation (Gell, 2018,

p. 31). In this case, the analysis of the effectiveness of artistic techniques must encompass, according to Gell, the psychological aspect of the anthropology of art. That is, the combination of a theory of social effectiveness with considerations of a cognitive nature, because, as he notes, “we cannot dissociate cognition from sociability” (Gell, 2018, p. 126). Thus, the artistic index ceases to be understood as a product to be seen as the extension of an agent, who, through an artisanal process – be it artifact or performance – externalizes and revitalizes a cognitive process of a given social environment (Gell, 2018, p. 342).

Regarding the study of music, one of the main dilemmas of ethnomusicology was based, throughout the 20th century, on the understanding of two essential planes of approach: that of sounds and that of behaviors (often assuming a relationship of determination of the first by the second in which music was understood as a mode of representation of culture). One of the main ethnomusicologists to think of these two planes in interaction, but not in complete determination, was John Blacking (2007). For this researcher, the word “music” encompasses an enormous variety of “musics”, categorized by their producers not only by “special symbolic systems and types of social action”, but also “[...] a specific innate framework of cognitive and sensory capacities that human beings are predisposed to use in communicating with and the production of sense of their environment” (Blacking, 2007, p. 202). As Blacking (2007, p. 206) explains,

The ways in which people ‘situate’ music ‘within other modes of social activity’; the classifications, metaphors, similarities, metonymies, analogies and other means they use to incorporate it into the texture of their ‘particular pattern of life’; and the decisions they make for – or because of – musical performance are vital clues in uncovering musical grammars and the kinds of thought and intelligence involved in making the world’s musics.

Thus, considering the assumptions of Gell and Blacking, we can think that Grotowski’s research, in the Theatre of Sources, was concerned with investigating how certain cognitive capacities could be transmitted – through direct collaboration with the representatives of the traditions – for the experimentation of other modes of sociability in an ontologically plural world. In this context, it should be considered, however, that this knowledge has always been present in Afro-diasporic traditions – through

different crossings, recreations and transcreations of knowledge, practices and cosmoperceptions – as a mechanism of cultural resistance. As Martins (2002) points out, Africa, in all its diversity, transcreated its presence in the Americas “through countless processes of cognition, assertion and metamorphosis, formal and conceptual” (Martins, 2002, p. 70). In this sense,

Ritual performances, ceremonies and festivities, for example, are fertile memory environments of vast repertoires of mnemonic reserves, kinetic actions, patterns, techniques and residual cultural procedures recreated, restored and expressed in and by the body. Rites transmit and institute aesthetic, philosophical and metaphysical knowledge, among others, as well as procedures, techniques, either in their symbolic frame, or in the modes of enunciation, in the apparatuses and conventions that sculpt their performance. In this perspective, the ritual performative act not only refers us to the semantic and symbolic universe of the double repetition of a re-presented action (Schechner’s ‘twice-behaved behavior’), but constitutes, in itself, the action itself. For Schechner (1994, p. 28), ‘the ritual process is performance’ and, as such, alludes not only to time and space, but also to extensions across various cultural and personal boundaries (Martins, 2002, p. 72).

In African matrix ritual practices, such as those of Yoruba and Ewe-Fon epistemologies, artistic thought is linked to a particular mode of action: a complex form of agency between human beings, forces of nature, cultural institutions, ancestors, etc. Thus, although their artistic forms carry symbolic aspects and produce spectacular elements, they present themselves, first and foremost, as vehicles of perception/ actualization of the world for their participants. In this sense, we can say that, attentive to this dimension, Grotowski was not interested in the representation of the aesthetic elements of rituals. The investigations with the transcultural group sought to find “simple actions”, so that performers from different cultures would be able to perform them, thus coming into contact with other types of cognition and broadening their habitual perceptions. This, as Grotowski would emphasize in the 1980s, would only be possible if the performer was willing to work rigorously and deeply on his own psychophysical potentialities. In his words: “It is not good will that will save the work, but mastery. [...] If someone comes from outside to participate in this kind of work, it is as if he/she were confronted with a technique: a very precise, artistic technique” and then “we have the obligation to be competent” (Grotowski, 2016b, p. 45-47).

In this scope, the collaboration with the Haitian artist and researcher Maud Robart was essential. Born in Port-au-Prince, the capital of Haiti, Robart was raised at the crossroads of traditional African cultures, especially Vodou, and French colonial culture. In 1971, she began painting with the multifaceted artist Tiga (Jean Claude Garoute), with whom she founded and ran, from 1972, the artistic community of *Saint Soleil*, located in the village of Soisson la Montagne. It was in the process of building her house in the village that the artistic community was born. Through interaction with the workers on the construction site – many of whom were farmers –, a relationship of artistic discovery and collaboration began to emerge, based on Tiga's architectural guidelines. Once the construction of the house was finished, Robart and Tiga continued their work with the farmers, exploring different materials and creative formats (sculpture, painting, drawing...), as well as holding artistic meetings that often ended with performances based on traditional Haitian tales, legends and songs (Robart, 2006b, p. 57-58). Grotowski, who at that time was beginning to research the Theatre of Sources, became interested in the group's work and, in 1977, made his first trip to Haiti. This marked the beginning of a collaboration with Robart, which would continue until 1993, in different programs: in the field expeditions of the Theatre of Sources (in Haiti and other locations in the world); in the laboratory research and open workshops of the Theatre of Sources (in Poland); in the Objective Drama Program (in the United States); and in the Workcenter of Jerzy Grotowski (in Italy). Although Robart speaks little about this period, some aspects of her current research – conducted in France, where she has lived since the 1990s – allow us to glimpse certain ethical and practical elements of work that would have marked her relationship with the Polish artist.

In dealing with Haitian Vodou chants, from their formal aspects and the specific cosmoperception on which they are based, Robart (2006a, p. 35) says:

In the metaphysical conception of most African peoples, the supreme value is Life. It represents the 'real context' and, at the same time, is expressed in terms of strength, power, energy, dynamism... This value finds its realization in the form of enthusiasm, a specific higher form of religious emotion, which once meant: 'having the God in oneself'... And the scope of all its practices is to intensify or consolidate life (our translation)⁵.

Beyond the fruitful beauty of the melodies, the rhythmic element, very close to biological rhythms, is the dominant characteristic of the Vodou chants I use. For the peoples of ancient Africa – from which these songs derive – rhythm carries within itself the creative force of the universe: ‘In the beginning was rhythm and rhythm was in God. And the creator verb was the rhythmic word of God. From it, creation was born. Rhythm guarantees exchanges with the other planes of creation. Individual rhythm linked to the rhythm of the universe’. It is for this reason that a dance and a chant are sacred, ritual actions endowed with a meaning inherent in the form itself – therefore not attributed in a conventional way – and that calls for different levels of understanding (Robart, 2006a, p. 44, our translation)⁶.

For the researcher, the form, with all its artisanal aspects, would not simply be a means of representing the symbolic aspects of tradition, since its vocation would be to transmit, through incarnated experience, a way of synchronizing the individual experience of each person with the generating forces of all types of life. It is, according to Robart (2006a, p. 41), “[...] a living heritage that perpetuates the original intention of uniting worlds, universes and levels, and that links us directly to an ancient form of creativity”. For the researcher, the notion of creativity is linked to that of spontaneity, as a factor that – different from that commonly explored in the theatrical sphere – is “[...] capable of revealing, in the present instant, both the singularity of each person and their belonging to a broader order, overcoming the conditioning of all the categories that limit our ways of being or acting” (Robart, 2006c, p. 78). For that, this knowing-doing explores, beyond rhythm, the vibrational aspects, melodies, tonalities, words, breathing, and movements, simultaneously engaging the sensations, images, thoughts, and emotions awakened in the practitioner’s experience. Because it is a knowledge of oral tradition, whose apprehension can only occur through experience, the practitioner needs to expose himself to the “direct, physical, physiological and psychic impact” of the chants (Robart, 2006a, p. 43). However, taking into account that these knowledges are based on a way of acting and feeling that seems very distant from the mechanisms of behavior of Euro-American societies, Robart’s work is concerned with investigating the processes through which a reception more suited to the specific nature of the chants can take place in other contexts. In her words:

Is it still possible to reconcile spiritual values and cultural norms? How can the encounter of cultures and their different scientific, artistic and philo-

sophical systems be a source of mutual enrichment rather than an unequal dilution in globalism? [...]over the years, considering that each transmission may or may not benefit from a situation favorable to its reception, I have been led to question whether the problems posed by the use of artistic forms belonging to one system, in other cultural systems, are considered in their essential aspects. The use of the term ‘transmission’ refers here, of course, to the need to create the appropriated conditions that offer the opportunity to undertake a journey of deepening traditional art and to realize the essence of the experiences connected with it. The need to understand certain mechanisms in intercultural exchanges has become a concern for me. This constitutes the reason for the main questions guiding the application of my research in a context different from the one in which it was born (Robart, 2006a, p. 37, our translation)⁷.

As Robart points out, in contact with Haitian Vodou chants, it is essential that participants assume a conscious, responsible commitment focused on an “active relationship with the musical substance” (Robart, 2006a, p. 38). In this sense, the artist reinforces: “before wanting to use, one must first have experienced and understood a lot” (Robart, 2006a, p. 40). Otherwise, the encounter of different cultural forms may result in a “[...] superficial penetration, which generates trivial interpretations, or in a conventional use, based on borrowing and falsification, which stimulate, for both parties, a process of folklorization” (Robart, 2006a, p. 40). For the researcher, an investigation of this type must primarily be concerned with real requirements that allow us to “cross the appearance of forms” and enter the complex world of the traditions one wants to know. An ethical-methodological posture that would also allow us to re-evaluate what is usually called “field research” (Robart, 2006a, p. 40-41). In this sense, Robart understands that only a direct contact with these elements, through practical exploration, can allow a deeper knowledge about the human creative potential that the Euro-American cultural models have not been enough to clarify. A motive that should, likewise, “encourage us to resist standardization, one of the most perverse effects of globalization” (Robart, 2006a, p. 46).

Such an approach, therefore, cannot, refer to pre-established methodologies. According to Robart, a specific education of creativity is needed that allows us to penetrate – through an experimental, direct and rigorous way – the ways of artistic knowing-doing of the traditions and in the human experiences they can induce (Robart, 2006a, p. 46). In this sense, we

can say that Robart's working tools are born precisely from the relationship between tradition and modernity. As she explains, "[...] contrary to common sense, tradition contains in itself an implicit power of renewal" (Robart apud Baruffi, 2006, p. 164). Thus, in seeking to penetrate the heart of this process of transformation, Robart selects – and, in a way, adapts – certain elements of Haitian Vodou – such as rhythm and the vibratory aspect, for example –, that would allow individuals from other contexts to approach its mobilizing principles. At the same time, with regard to the emergence of these new work structures, the researcher makes a point of stating that this process does not seek to respond to the "modern need to invent the new at all times" (Robart apud Baruffi, 2006, p. 164-165). Through the relationship between tradition and modernity, it seeks to rediscover "[...] the oral modality and its power to communicate, in a global language, all that underlies, revealed and still hidden, behind the appearance of forms" (Robart apud Baruffi, 2006, p. 165-166). A work that can only be carried out, therefore, in an environment protected from the expectations of production, result and dissemination, typical of the modern world. In Robart's words (2006a, p. 51, our translation),

Whatever objective degree of efficiency one wishes to recognize in such instruments as supporting a research programme, it is not enough to present them in one form or another; the effectiveness of these instruments does not depend on magic or fanciful speculation. The transmission of these traditional structures, in a context where values are completely different, depends strictly on their corollary, that is, the reception of this transmission. It is necessary to open a path of lucid/complex research, which includes 'multiple possibles' and is articulated in a project that promotes culture. An innovator path, which also integrates the principle according to which the appropriate conditions that establish the possibilities of a fruitful exchange can be discovered and rediscovered only in the friction of the encounter itself, disinterested, taking risks and the necessary time, without fear of the 'uncertainties of ambiguity', in order to collect relevant data capable of leading to the sharing of life experience⁸.

This environment conducive to the reception of a traditional knowledge, through a complex research on the encounter of cultures, protected from the expectation of utilitarian results and not constrained by pre-established deadlines, seems to have been found in the projects carried out with Grotowski, especially at the Workcenter. According to Robart, from

the beginning of this collaboration, there was a kind of common ethic in the investigations of both artists (Robart, 2006b, p. 61). In the scope of practice, many concrete elements of this partnership would influence the development of their later work:

It was interesting and useful, for me, to be able to compare traditional performance techniques with other modern reference systems, such as Stanislavski's method and the techniques of *organicity* developed by Grotowski. On the other hand, my contribution to this work and the deepening of my personal research could be realized in unique conditions. It always comes back to this notion of the right conditions to work, to search, to develop something. There, I had the opportunity and the time, through particular and revealing contact elements, to become aware of the problematic related to the encounter of cultures (Robart, 2006b, p. 61, our translation)⁹.

As she points out, certain working principles explored at the Work-center – such as the relationship between tradition and the artist's personal work, the relationship between ritual and spectacle, as well as all the elementary technical aspects that concern the domain of performative art – would also become part of her later research (Robart, 2006b, p. 62). It is important to note here that Robart's approach is not aimed at public spectacle. Her workshops aim at the direct participation of people – through rigorous work on the psychophysical capacities of the participants – in order to penetrate the “spirit of chant¹⁰”. As she explains:

The fundamental proposition linked to my approach is not to feel good singing a beautiful exotic song with a friendly group. One must become capable, without any fabulation at this level, of animating the ‘substance’ of the chants or, if you prefer, of ‘making body’ with the content and the background. The ‘moving spirit of the song’, its hidden dance, can be presented through a fair understanding of what is involved and the proper movement of energy. There is no trick to it, no ready-made mode of use. This work requires of the artist a synthesis of paradoxical skills to connect with the internal energy of the chant and its pulsation. The latter represents the coordinating element that synchronizes the conscious and instinctive acts of the artist for the realization of an ideal experience based on intimate interaction with the changing essence of chanting, which becomes part of the self. It is then perhaps possible to feel that ‘it is the chanting that chants you’ or, even, that ‘Everything comes, Everything dances and Everything chants’ (Robart, 2006a, p. 44-45, our translation)¹¹.

This is possible because, as Robart understands, the body-voice is an instrument of great precision that, beyond the “biosocial context” of a specific person, can connect with the components of other knowledge systems – such as those in which “multidimensional forces or causes” operate, such as Haitian Vodou (Robart, 2006a, p. 48). In this process of transmission, a notion of precision is affirmed, proper to traditional techniques, which is different from that based on mere formal execution. According to Robart, this precision has to do with organicity, a condition that realizes the unity between the foundation, content and the form of chants, through an integrated organization of the person at the “cognitive, biological, affective and supra-mental” levels, and which is, at the same time, closely linked to the “unpredictability of the dynamism of life” (Robart, 2006a, p. 48). In this way, understanding the appeal encoded in Vodou chants emerges as a “felt evidence, experienced through the direct experience, in bodily experience” (Robart, 2006b, p. 65). Here, the main skill to be explored is that of listening. A conscious listening that, according to Robart, “accompanies the process of organicity, as spontaneous response to the subtlest perception” (Robart, 2006a, p. 50). It is about an active – but, as she emphasizes, not voluntaristic – posture that must guide the process. Instead of anticipating emotions or projecting pre-established images and meanings, it is necessary to develop the skill of listening: this is the “[...] basic condition to favor the functioning of the factors that condition access to this direct experience – which, in its highest quality, survives, paradoxically, without anticipatory strategies of realization” (Robart, 2006b, p. 66).

In her work, as I was able to verify during my participation in the workshop *L'esprit du chant*¹², Robart avoids explaining the meanings of the chants and the movements. The approximation must happen, in the embodied experience of the participants, through the perception of the rhythms, the resonances, the melodies and the relationship with the space. I quote the description of part of this experience, as recorded in my field diary:

We are seated on the benches, forming a kind of semicircle and, in this position, we remain for a long time chanting in response to the calls led by Robart. Different chants are explored, one after the other – sometimes without interruption and sometimes with a few moments of silence. There is no commentary or direction from Robart, we just follow her lead through the songs. I am already tired and a little sleepy, my body feels heavy, but I remain attentive to the continuous repeti-

tions of the chant. Gradually, spontaneously, a subtle ripple begins [to] appear in my spine – like a little impulse that rises from the base, extends in a movement to the head, and then returns downwards – all this accompanies the rhythm of the song. It cheers me up, gives me a certain vigor. My arms start to be involved in this process. The hands go in front of the body, close to the chest, and start moving alternately up and down. I feel like a child who, even though forced to remain seated on a bench, plays and dances to this song. I continue, for a while, to let myself be carried away by these sensations and associations. Until, at a certain moment, Robart interrupts the chanting and, in a cheerful way, asks me – *What are you doing?* – I, not knowing very well how to describe it in another language¹³, get lost between words and cannot answer. She then rephrases the question – *Who is doing this?* – and then, as in a flash, everything becomes clear and I say – *‘Il giocoliere’, the juggler.* She says: – *That is good. You have discovered something that is in accordance with the chanting. That juggler, ‘ce jongleur’, is alive in you. But be careful. Stay close to what gives birth to him within you. It is important that the outer movements do not anticipate or override this inner life.* Then we went back chanting. I try to stay attentive to the origin of this impulse and, for a few moments, this juggler/giocoliere/jongleur is animated, in me, through the exploration of chanting. But after a few moments, he disappears. We chant a few more songs and the session is closed (Researcher’s field diary).

From the process experienced in this chanting session, I understand that, through a certain abandonment of the voluntarist attitude – when, even feeling sleepy, I kept myself with active listening – I was able to perceive the pulsation of the chant and, for a few moments, “make body” with it. It was a spontaneous reaction generated from a subtle perception – not only of the sound aspects, but also of body sensations, associations and space. Robart, in her intervention, seemed both to recognize this process, pointing out that this was a line of investigation to be developed, and to point out certain precautions regarding the delicate phenomenon that was presented there. In my view, it was a matter of preventing associations from becoming mere representation – becoming fixated on bodily movements disconnected from inner impulses – through continuous work on the precise elements of chanting. What was presented, in the theatrical language, was properly the relationship between structure and spontaneity¹⁴. As the researcher explains,

The true spontaneity arises at the conjunction of opposites. It is a *promise of freedom* hidden at the heart of the highly codified forms of traditional art instruments. A promise that must be discovered by yourself, through a precise,

personal and creative effort, to access an authentic spontaneous expression in which ‘doing’ and ‘living’ are inseparable (Robart, 2006c, p. 78, our translation)¹⁵.

We can say that it is a learning process aimed at regenerating sensitivity – weakened by modern life habits – from an approach, rooted in oral tradition, which can lead us to a deeper understanding of the artistic phenomenon. For Robart (2006c, p. 79- 80), this understanding requires a courageous personal involvement and, at the same time, “[...] a certain taste for risk, for the unknown, a will to overcome – provided, of course, that all this is assumed with awareness and, therefore, with rigor”. This need for rigor and skill in dealing with performative techniques from different origins also seems to be close to the approach proposed by Blacking, in the field of ethnomusicology, for a better understanding of the artistic-musical phenomena of non-western cultures. As the researcher proposes:

[...] when the grammar of music coincides with the grammar of a particular person’s body, cognitive resonance can, in part, be felt and apprehended because of social experience. But when the grammar of music coincides with the ‘musical’ biogrammar of the human body, in a broad sense, cognitive resonance can be felt and apprehended despite specific social experiences. An intuitive understanding of music is possible because performers and listeners possess, like music makers, the same innate musical ‘competence’ or ‘intelligence’ (Blacking, 2007, p. 215).

We can thus think that although artistic techniques and forms are inseparable from the senses and symbolic aspects of a sociocultural environment, individuals who do not master the same symbolic codes can be impacted – and obtain an approximate experience – as a result of certain common sensory and cognitive capacities regarding musical experience. It is in this sense that the artisanal knowledge of certain non-western schools and traditions could be thought of in its potency to – through a work guided by rigor and precision – provide processes of otherness. It is also in this sense, it seems to me, that in considering the dynamics and roles that music can play in social life and cultural organization, Blacking proposes to think of “artistic cognition” as a vehicle for the transformation of social forms:

The idea that artistic cognition is an important source of human life, and that artistic praxis can influence and initiate social action, should not be dismissed [...], music making can be an indispensable tool for the intensifi-

cation and transformation of consciousness as a first step towards transforming social forms (Blacking, 2007, p. 208).

We could thus say that if the techniques addressed by Grotowski and Robart are not completely transposable to other contexts, they provide clues about elementary principles of human behavior and the possibilities of working on the body, the sensitive and consciousness, from new epistemologies, in artistic-investigative contexts in which participants are willing to perform a “work on themselves”. In this way, working on traditional knowledge would require an effort of adaptation: not only of the original techniques, but mainly of our ways of knowing.

Thus, we can say that Grotowski’s research, from the Theatre of Sources (and in direct collaboration with artists/performers from different cultures, especially Robart), seemed to want to revive a forgotten aspect in Western societies, since the dissociation between art and rite, as the possibility of producing knowledge about the world through a knowledge that is constituted by experience¹⁶. At the same time, is not about imitating other cultures, but about meeting them and discovering instruments (procedures, ways of being, tactics) that would help us to expand the limits of Western culture itself, towards what could be called a decolonization of the *self* of the subject. In this case, culture would not be seen as a field of representation of reality, but rather as a field of response to reality. As Suely Rolnik (2018) would say, we need to re-appropriate our vital potencies, as creative and cooperative forces, which were diverted to the accumulation of capital. Although this work takes place in the field of subjective experiences – and, therefore, within the scope of each person’s existence –, the search for these means of re-appropriation does not take place in isolation, it depends on a collective will involved in the construction of a common. The arts, if not reduced to mere commodities, can be a privileged field for this action. A means of micropolitical insurgency – not exempt from the paradoxes, contradictions and tensions generated by the encounter – that would enable us to re-appropriate the “knowledges-of-the-body”, the “knowledges-of-the-alive” (Rolnik, 2018, p. 111). Or, as I discussed earlier, an environment aimed at regenerating sensitivity, weakened by modern ways of life, that assumes the dimension of what we could call – as proposed by Mencarelli – “a politics of the sensitive” (Mencarelli, 2017, p. 5-6).

Notes

- ¹ Such as *Akropolis* (1962), *The Constant Prince* (1965) and *Apocalypsis cum Figuris* (1969).
- ² Texts from the 1970s, 1980s and 1990s, mostly not yet available in Portuguese, whose access was facilitated by the careful work of organization and translation, carried out by Carla Pollastrelli, in the Italian edition of the collection *Grotowski – Testi 1954 – 1998*.
- ³ Especially the experiences linked to the Candomblé Ketu terreiros *Ilê Axé Opo Omin*, in the city of Londrina (PR), led by Iyalorixá Omin and, later, *Ilê Asè Oyá Funsó*, in the city of São Paulo (SP), led by Iyalorixá Clarinha de Oya.
- ⁴ Available, for the most part, in the Italian translation published by the journal *Biblioteca Teatrale*, in 2006 (see: *Biblioteca Teatrale. La Ricerca di Maud Robart: L'orizzonte arcaico e atemporale del canto integrato*. Roma: Bulzoni Editore, n. 77, Jan./Mar. 2006).
- ⁵ This quote was translated into English from Portuguese version. In the original text: “Nella concezione metafisica della maggioranza dei popoli africani, il valore supremo è la Vita. Essa rappresenta il ‘contesto reale’ e allo stesso tempo esplicita i termini di forza, potere, energia, dinamismo... Questo valore trova il proprio compimento sotto la forma dell’entusiasmo, forma superiore specifica d’emozione religiosa che significava un tempo: ‘avere il Dio in sé’... E lo scopo di tutte le loro pratiche è d’intensificare o di consolidare la vita” (Robart, 2006a, p. 35).
- ⁶ This quote was translated into English from Portuguese version. In the original text: “Al di là della bellezza pregnante delle melodie, l’elemento ritmico è la caratteristica dominante dei canti del vodù che utilizzo, molto vicino ai ritmi biologici. Per le popolazioni della vecchia Africa – da cui questi canti derivano – il ritmo porta in sé il potere creatore dell’universo: ‘All’inizio era il ritmo e il ritmo era in Dio. E il verbo creatore era la parola ritmata di Dio. Da essa è nata la creazione. Il ritmo assicura gli scambi con gli altri piani della creazione. Ritmo individuale collegato al ritmo dell’universo’. È a questo titolo che una danza, un canto, sono sacri, atti rituali dotati di un significato inerente alla forma stessa – dunque non attribuito in modo convenzionale – e che sollecita diversi livelli di comprensione” (Robart, 2006a, p. 44).

- ⁷ This quote was translated into English from Portuguese version. In the original text: “È ancora possibile conciliare valori spirituali e norme culturali? In che modo l’incontro delle culture e dei loro differenti sistemi scientifici, artistici e filosofici può essere fonte d’arricchimento reciproco, piuttosto che una diluizione non egualitaria nel mondialismo? [...] col passare degli anni, considerando che ogni trasmissione può o meno beneficiare di una congiuntura favorevole alla *ricezione di questa trasmissione*, sono stata portata a chiedermi se i problemi posti dall’utilizzo delle forme artistiche appartenenti a un sistema, in altri sistemi culturali, fossero considerati nei loro aspetti essenziali. L’impiego del termine ‘trasmissione’ rimanda qui evidentemente alla necessità di creare delle giuste condizioni che offrano le possibilità di intraprendere un percorso di approfondimento dell’arte tradizionale e di render conto dell’essenza delle esperienze che vi si ricollegano. Il bisogno di comprendere certi meccanismi, negli scambi interculturali, è divenuto una preoccupazione per me. Esso costituisce il motivo degli interrogativi principali che orientano l’applicazione della mia ricerca in un contesto diverso da quello in cui essa è nata” (Robart, 2006a, p. 37).
- ⁸ This quote was translated into English from Portuguese version. In the original text: “Ma quale che sia il grado oggettivo di efficienza che si voglia riconoscere a tali strumenti come supporto a un programma di ricerca, non è sufficiente introdurli sotto una forma o sotto un’altra; l’efficacia di tali strumenti non dipende dalla magia o dalla speculazione fantasista. La trasmissione di queste strutture tradizionali, in un contesto in cui i valori sono completamente differenti, dipende strettamente dal suo corollario, ovvero la ricezione di questa trasmissione. S’impone l’esigenza di aprire una via di ricerca lucida/complessa, che includa ‘multipli possibili’ e sia articolata in un progetto portatore di cultura. Una via innovatrice, che integri anche il principio secondo il quale le condizioni adatte che stabiliscono le possibilità di uno scambio fecondo, possono essere scoperte e riscoperte solo nella frizione dell’incontro stesso, disinteressato, correndo dei rischi e prendendo il tempo necessario, senza timore delle ‘incertezze dell’ambiguità’, al fine di raccogliere i dati pertinenti capaci di portare alla condivisione di esperienze viventi” (Robart, 2006a, p. 51).
- ⁹ This quote was translated into English from Portuguese version. In the original text: “È stato interessante e utile per me poter confrontare le tecniche performative tradizionali con altri sistemi di riferimento moderni, quali il metodo di Stanislavskij e le tecniche di *organicità* elaborate da Grotowski. D’altronde, il mio contributo a questo lavoro e l’approfondimento della mia

ricerca personale hanno potuto realizzarsi in condizioni uniche. Si ritorna sempre a questa nozione di condizioni giusta per lavorare, per cercare, per sviluppare qualcosa. Là, ho avuto l'occasione e il tempo, attraverso elementi di contatto particolari e rivelatori, di prendere coscienza della problematica collegata all'incontro tra le culture" (Robart, 2006b, p. 61).

- ¹⁰ *L'esprit du chant* was the title of the workshop conducted by Maud Robart, in September 2019 in the city of Labarrère, France, which I attended for seven days.
- ¹¹ This quote was translated into English from Portuguese version. In the original text: "La proposta fondamentale legata al mio approccio, non è quella di sentirsi bene cantando una bella canzone esotica con un gruppo simpatico. Occorre diventare capaci, senza alcuna affabulazione su questo piano, di animare 'la sostanza' dei canti o, se preferite, di 'fare corpo' con il contenuto e con il fondo. Lo 'spirito mobile del canto', la sua danza nascosta, possono essere presentiti attraverso una comprensione giusta di ciò che è in causa e una messa in movimento adeguata dell'energia. Non esiste alcun trucco per questo, alcuna modalità d'uso già pronta. Tale lavoro richiede all'artista una sintesi di competenze paradossali per legarsi all'energia interna del canto e alla sua pulsazione. Quest'ultima rappresenta l'elemento di coordinazione che sincronizza gli atti cosciente e istintivi dell'artista per il compimento di un'esperienza ottimale fondata sull'interazione intima con l'essenza mutevole del canto, che diventa una parte di se stessi. Allora, è forse possibile sentire che 'è il canto che ti canta' o ancora che 'Tutto viene, Tutto danza e Tutto canta'" (Robart, 2006a, p. 44-45).
- ¹² Held in September 2019 at *Las Téoulères* farm and cultural association, located in the Labarrère countryside in the south of France.
- ¹³ Robart conducted the workshop in French, which was translated for me by her assistants into Italian.
- ¹⁴ At the heart of Grotowski's investigations on the work of the actor, we find the relationship between form and living reactions, or structure and spontaneity, understood as a *conjunctio oppositorum* (Motta Lima, 2005).
- ¹⁵ This quote was translated into English from Portuguese version. In the original text: "La vera spontaneità sorge nella congiunzione degli opposti. È una *promessa di libertà* nascosta nel cuore delle forme talmente codificate degli strumenti dell'arte tradizionale. Una promessa che occorre scoprire da se stessi,

mediante uno sforzo preciso, personale e creativo, per accedere a un'autentica espressione spontanea nella quale 'fare' e 'vivere' sono indissociabili" (Robart, 2006c, p. 78).

- ¹⁶ It is possible to observe similarities and differences, as well as continuities and discontinuities, in the work of Grotowski and Robart, both in the early years of the Workcenter's activity (when the center housed two independent research groups: one led by Robart and the other by Thomas Richards, under the supervision of Grotowski), and from 1993 onwards, when the Haitian artist left the Workcenter and began to develop her research in the interior of France. For lack of space, this discussion was not included in the text of the article, but some of its aspects, albeit in an introductory way, can be found in the PhD thesis (Matricardi, 2022).

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Luciano Matricardi is an actor, teacher and theater researcher. He teaches in the Performing Arts course at the Universidade Estadual de Maringá (UEM) and has taught in the Performing Arts courses at the Universidade Federal da Paraíba (UFPB) and at the Universidade Estadual de Londrina (UEL), as well as in the Arts and Cultural Production courses at the Universidade Federal Fluminense (UFF). PhD in Performing Arts from the Universidade Federal do Estado do Rio de Janeiro (UNIRIO). During his doctorate, he completed a sandwich internship at the Università degli studi di Torino (Italy) with field research at the Work-center of Jerzy Grotowski and Thomas Richards (Italy) and participation in the workshop *L'esprit du chant* (France), with Haitian artist and researcher Maud Robart.

ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-7781-4710>

E-mail: luciano.matricardi@gmail.com

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