

Bringing ethics to the surface: the AND_Lab project from RE.AL

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Muito tem sido escrito sobre a relação ética que se tem procurado estabelecer com os espectadores no contexto geral da prática cénica contemporânea, mas pouca atenção tem sido dada à forma como as diferentes propostas artísticas podem mobilizar (mais ou menos) forças de reflexão ética – e de que forma essa reflexão se traduz numa dimensão política, isto é, de que forma se relaciona com a nossa capacidade para afectar o modo como vivemos em conjunto. Neste artigo, comecei por identificar as premissas básicas sobre as quais a relação entre estética e ética tem sido avançada nas artes performativas, usando o AND_Lab, da RE.AL, como exemplo de um projecto no qual o processo de construção artística está directamente orientado para levar os participantes a reflectir e agir de forma eticamente consciente – ao mesmo tempo que coloca novas tensões naquilo que pode significar produzir arte no mundo objectificado das artes performativas de hoje.

ARTES PERFORMATIVAS / ÉTICA / ESTÉTICA / REPRESENTAÇÃO

SOMETHING ABOUT ETHICS IN PERFORMING ARTS

The aim of this article is not to undertake a philosophic discussion about ethics, but to analyze in which ways contemporary performing arts have been pointing towards an existential questioning, thus contributing to a rethinking of the values of aesthetics by virtue of its ethical implications. In order to analyze that, I will start by pinpointing the common understanding of ethics in contemporary thought, what can be considered an ethical experience, and how those viewpoints may be influencing performing arts' practice towards ethical issues.

In line with the post-modernist concern in expanding boundaries instead of settling limits, asking questions instead of looking for answers, value the flow of things instead of its order, the question of ethics has been mostly raised in the open sense given by subjectivity (Vicente, 2015). We have been consistently moving off from the idea of a universal "I", towards the notion of ethics as an individual demand – as put it by

Emmanuel Levinas, a matter of personal sensibility and responsibility to the other (Critchley, 2009). What once was seen as an objective force that was part of a larger constellation – the being of beings –, is now ever more seen as a “movement of desire that tends towards the other” (*idem*: 65)¹, that is, a movement of ethical intersubjectivity. Subsequent to this perspective, a number of contemporary philosophers, such as Giorgio Agamben, Gilles Deleuze, Donna Haraway, Bruno Latour, Bernard Stiegler or Mario Perniola, among others, no longer presupposes an ethical connection to the human beings alone, based on the trust on the common sense – an aptitude that (allegedly) distinguishes the humans from animals –, but also to the so called non-human, thus leading us to what many already named the post-human era. An era in which the unconscious desire to connect responsively with the outer, with the “reality” in play, could be considered the first and ultimate ethical claim. A claim that opens the way to *being-in-the-world* that, according to Martin Heidegger’s conception, is beyond the division or separation of entities into subjects and objects.²

But how can the ethical dimension be manifested and experienced? Many philosophers, including the same Heidegger, but also Eugen Fink, Hans-Georg Gadamer, Jean-Paul Sartre, Ludwig Wittgenstein, Alain Badiou or Maurice Merleau-Ponty, have proposed several approaches to what has been generally called an *Ethics of play*. These approaches share a common urgency: respect for the event of life altogether, for the other and for the world rather than the individualist pursuit for control over the real. No matter what the approach is, play can be used as an essential framework in which ethical questions may be (artificially) introduced into decision-making processes. Since play provides a significant distance from reality and the tyranny of the everyday, and relief from the consequences of life, then the responsibility of the “players” can be tested without losing their ability for critical thinking. In theory, play is able to cast the individuals into a state of awareness of becoming-other – in the Deleuzian open-ended sense of the expression³ –, that could lead

1 When referring to Levinas’ notion of ethics.

2 *Being-in-the-world* is an expression that comes from the Heidegger’s notion of *Dasein* (being-with) that refers to the entity that characterizes human self awareness, that is, the entity that comprises and recognizes what it means to be human within the world – cf. Heidegger (1992).

3 For Deleuze, becoming-other refers to the process of coming to be, and not to the static characteristics of the subject. It is a process of becoming worthy of the event that is taking place by living it more fully, that is, by living it within the possibilities of the production of the new – cf. Semetsky (2006).

them to a process of self-reevaluation, which in turn might prove to be powerful enough to re-shape their responsibility and ethical behavior towards the world. But that can only be attained, as argued by Jacques Derrida, after having gone through the experience of deconstruction, an experience that presuppose the surpassing of our preconceived notions of the subject, and that can be considered the departing point of any re-definition of the self. A re-definition that is neither negative nor nihilistic, as the author defended (*idem*), but driven by an affirmative openness to the Other prior to questioning: what justification is there for me before the Other, before the event of life altogether?

Anchored in deconstructionism, a growing number of contemporary performances have been making use of those approaches of play to structure the possible relations with the spectators, in order to create experiences that enable the spectators to ethically reflect, or even respond, within the duration of the performance.⁴ This ethical response is normally not driven by pedagogical motivations, where the artists instruct the audience on how to react, to think or to believe, but by a share “response-ability”. Following Jacques Rancière’s *Emancipated Spectator*, it is left to each spectator, the subjective (and uncertain) ethical implications of the artistic proposal (Rancière, 2010). One question remains though: how can one take this kind of play seriously, without reducing ethics to an entertaining game? The answer lies in the artistic dimension of the playing process. With reference once again to Heidegger, the experience brought by art touches, by nature, the existential dimension of human beings – art brings forth the “happening of disclosedness of being set-into-work in the work itself” (Monni, 2004: 98).⁵ This is even more perceptible in performing arts, since what at the moment of the performance comes-to-present springs forth immediately in relation with the spectators. In this sense, a performance is not a mere artistic object or even an initiator of an artistic experience, but it also offers a possibility for spectators to participate in the unconcealedness of being(s) which is taking place at the moment of that live encounter. And it is this same encounter, this relation of forces of presence, this capacity to affect and being affected at play, which consubstantiates the meeting

4 The *Theatre of the Oppressed*, a social-oriented technique developed by Augusto Boal in the seventies, and disseminated all over the world, can be considered a possible precursor of this kind of practices.

5 When referring to Heidegger’s thinking about art, in which is not solely considered to be a matter of artistic experience but also understood in relation with a disclosure of a sense of existence.



AND GAME, JOÃO FIADEIRO AND FERNANDA EUGÉNIO, RE.AL, UNIVERSIDAD DE CHILE, 2013, [F] JOÃO FIADEIRO

of rhythms between aesthetics and ethics, and thus opens spectators' sensibility to how it is possible to be human in the world. As Levinas reminded, the ethical relation takes place primordially at the level of sensibility, not at the level of consciousness – “the ethical subject is a sensible subject, not a conscious subject” (Critchley, 2009: 63). In performing arts, the dimensions of ethics and aesthetics are then brought together through an affective relation with spectators, and it is that same capacity of becoming indistinct from one another that can significantly enhance the transformative power of the contemporary artistic proposals. One might therefore suggest that, the further a performance is able to mobilize those blending forces, the further will be able to affect spectators in the way they are “connected” to the world.

A NEW (ETHICAL) PARADIGM TOWARDS THE SPECTATORS

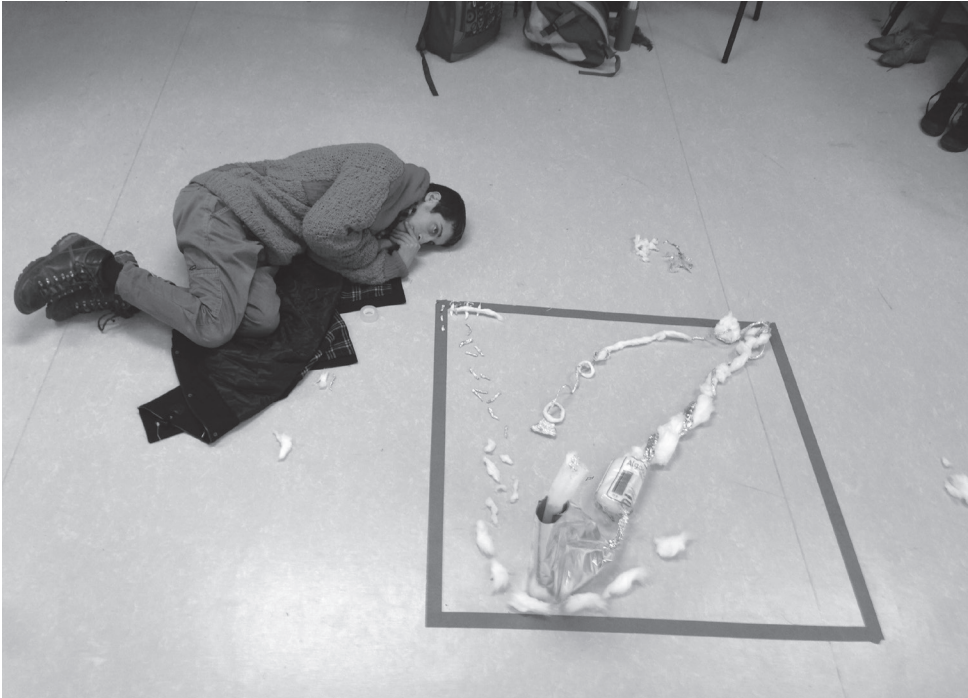
In line with the above, the artistic goals in performing arts have been gradually moving towards the need for more inclusive creative processes that are not aimed primarily at producing a work of art, but at achieving

other ethical-political ends – not in the sense of undermining the importance of art itself, but to expand it towards a larger and more significant outcome. In this context, the role of the audience has become more central in terms of the experience that is put in place within the artistic proposals. As a spectator, you now have to make more use of your creative capacity in relation to the construction of the artistic experience and assume the (subjective) responsibility of its interpretation. Furthermore, the ever more intimate experience of the live encounter between spectators and the event in play – that includes the co-presence of the performers and other spectators – creates the ideal conditions in which our needs for both affective and intellectual motivations are given free reign. As claimed by Lis Engel:

The ... body can be more attentive, more sensitive, more dynamic and feeling as a co-creating field of sensing-doing-creating. It has to do with processes of creation that always are interconnected. The event is a mutual “becoming” of body-mind-world. (2004: 51)

If properly engaged, spectators can effectively receive the performances as immediate experiences of human life – understood here in the vulnerable sense given by Brian Massumi (2002) of dimension of possibilities of the flow of the present as possibilities of self-transformation – which enables them to confront, and even re-categorize, their values during (and after) the ongoing performance. The way the spectators relate to the event, how they experience it and how they constitute themselves as experimental bodies leads inevitably to an update of their experience in relation to their attitude towards the world and life with others, and ultimately to self-transformation. Hence, it is the experiential character of the artistic proposals that enhances the spectators’ “response-ability” to feel the *hic et nunc* of the live event, and to make them use this capacity to look ahead, as an extension of themselves that points towards an existential questioning. Artistic experiences can then be both personally profound and political insightful, in the sense that they open the way to not only what could mean *being-in-the-world*, but also to imagine other ways of *being-with-one-another-in-the-world* – to appeal again to Heidegger.⁶ This can be even more evident in performances

6 “As this Being-in-the-world *Dasein* is, together with this, *Being-with-one-another*, being with others: Having the same world there with others, encountering one another, being with one another in the manner of *Being-for-one-another*” (Heidegger, 1992: 7-8).



AND GAME, JOÃO FIADEIRO AND FERNANDA EUGÉNIO, RE.AL, UNIVERSIDAD DE CHILE, 2013, [F] JOÃO FIADEIRO

where the “participations” of the spectators intersect or are dependent from one another, which can drive the experience to higher levels of inter-subjective negotiation. Not as much in the sense of collective bargaining but in the sense of encountering the other in the same plane of co-existential wondering. The conceptual openness at stake is hence not just about encouraging self-discovery, but also about the understanding of the artistic proposal as a vehicle for political questioning, since, ultimately, it refers to how we can live our lives together. From the point of view of the artists, maybe even more important than to construct a performance about the world, is then to open up the possibilities of existence within the world, or to put in a different way, to lay out a possible “world” – or “worlds” – in its involvement with being(s). Following Félix Guattari’s (1993) notion of the inseparable relation between ethics and aesthetics, this points to a new paradigm in performing arts, in which the different dramaturgies, choreographies, sensualities, in sum, practices at play, open themselves to express the intensification not only of shared creative processes but also of possibilities of life together. As put by the same Lis Engel:

To work with a concept of openness is not the same as “Anything goes”... Creative tasks open into possibilities of the many ways that something can be brought together and give new possibilities for everybody. This opening into an embodied dynamic understanding of the mutual creation of possibilities of freedom and expression for everyone point toward the aesthetic paradigm as an ethico-aesthetic paradigm. (2004: 54)

In face of this paradigm, many contemporary performances have been building upon experiences of ethical nature, that spectators cannot avoid – although may choose to ignore –, and that release them into a certain sense of community. This revival for a *sensus communis* can be understood, following Rancière’s arguments, as a symbolic form of resistance to consumerism and to the oppression of the economic hegemonies of capitalism, but it is also becoming increasingly significant in places – such as Portugal – affected by the aporias of socio-economic depressions, and that find themselves in the midst of a crisis of self-recognition and under the urgency of a political reinvention. The AND_Lab is one good example of a project that resonate this urgency and that opens the process of artistic composition to new forms of questioning and ethical positioning.

THE AND_LAB PROJECT

AND_Lab stands for Anthropology and Dance Laboratory.⁷ It is a collaborative project, existing since 2011, that operates in the articulation between the works of the choreographer João Fiadeiro – that had been developing since 1995 a creative technique called Real-Time Composition – and the anthropologist Fernanda Eugénio – that in parallel had developed a similar research method called Ethnography as Situated Performance. AND_Lab promotes an operative mode of “thinking-doing” called the *AND Game*, which, according to the authors, is at once “an inhabited philosophy, an ethics of living together, a com-position⁸ practice, and

7 It makes also an obvious reference to the Deleuzian symbolic use of the conjunction AND: “The AND is... the path of all relations ... subtends all relations... The AND as extra-being, inter-being” (Deleuze / Parnet, 2007: 57, *apud* Semetsky [2006: 4]).

8 “Com-position” is a term coined by João Fiadeiro and Fernanda Eugénio, a result of the sub-division of the word “composition” (“composição” in Portuguese). In the literal translation from the Portuguese, “com-posição” means “with-position”. It was created to express the underlying idea of the game (a process of “positioning-with-the-other”) against the closed sense of “composition”, which expresses a combination of positions.

a way of life”.⁹ The game is promoted and hosted by RE.AL, an artistic structure directed by João Fiadeiro, one of the pioneers of the New Portuguese Dance¹⁰, and that between 2008 and 2014 has suspended his activity as a choreographer and author, to turn his focus to projects where the process – by opposition to the product – becomes the central point of interest.¹¹

The game can be played by anyone interested in playing it and it is ruled by one concern – *how to live together* – and one motto – *how not to have an idea*. In practice, it consists in the encounter with a minimum of two participants at an empty table (or at another circumscribed space), which they began to fill and compose with a variety of objects and utensils that exists in the room for that purpose, of which cannot be excluded their own bodies. For each player the main purpose is to position him/herself with the other in respect to what is happening, without falling into the trap of the “why” question – “the work to do is one of ‘implication’ not one of ‘explanation’”¹². A kind of negotiation of presence then takes place, using only their “com-positional” actions as form of expression, and never the open dialogue through speech. Normally there is a trained person in the room to introduce the participants to the game and mediate possible doubts and unblock potential dilemmas that occur during the game time.¹³ Overall, this mediator tries to ensure that the participants meet the following methodological steps of *how to live together*: sensitivity to initial conditions; finding the common plane of the “com-position”; postponing the end, anticipating the end and accepting the end. It also tries to lead the participants in avoiding any pre-conceived ideas (*how not to have an idea*) about themselves, the others and what is taking place at the moment, which would bias the course of the event towards an ego-driven outcome. The proposal is then to depart from the *relation-with*, which, as acknowledged by Guattari (1993), precedes the formation of identities and individuals, and unfolds the capacity to affect the world. In theory, the event would become a

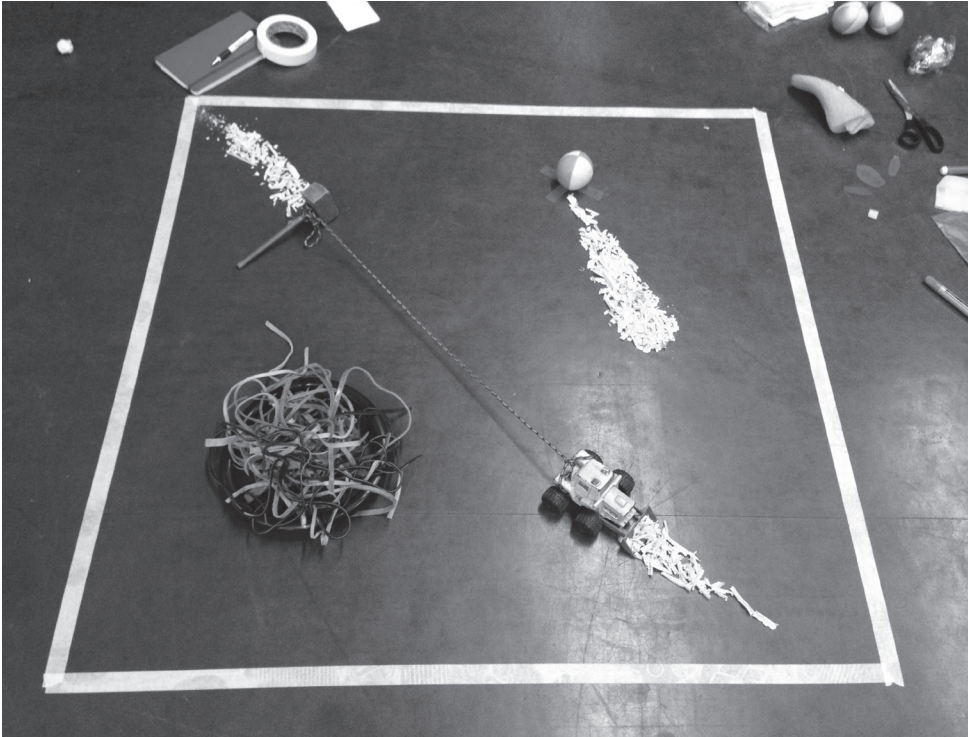
9 As stated in the project’s internet site: http://and-lab.org/o-and_lab.

10 A movement of a generation of choreographers that emerged in the late eighties, following the American post-modern movement as well as the French and Belgian Nouvelle Danse movements. The New Portuguese Dance fostered a set of fundamental changes in performing arts’ practice in Portugal.

11 Cf. <http://joaofiadeirobiography.blogspot.pt/>.

12 *The question game*, <http://and-lab.org/en/o-jogo-das-perguntas>.

13 Preferably this kind of intervention becomes dispensable as the participants become more aware and experienced in the game.



AND GAME, JOÃO FIADEIRO AND FERNANDA EUGÉNIO, RE.AL, UNA/BUENOS AIRES AND LISBON RESPECTIVELY, 2013, [F] JOÃO FIADEIRO

(co-created) world where the senses of will, desire, respect, responsibility and freedom intersect each other to point to one, and only one, direction – the extension of what is being mutually experienced. The goal is then never to answer the question of *how to live together*, but to keep it alive.

When I decided to participate in one of the sessions organized by RE.AL, I initially felt that the *AND Game* was some kind of a collective artistic compositional exercise, but soon realized that, more important than the artistic outcome(s) of the game was the uninterrupted movement towards the demands of the event itself, towards its continued existence. As a participant turned spectator of myself, it became very gripping the way I had to deal with my own ego and territorial instincts, and to try surpassing them in order to respect the dynamics of the event at play, which inevitably includes the overwhelming presence of the other participants/spectators. Analogously to a life together, ideally, this game of negotiation of presence would never end, but, as one can sadly conclude, it always does. There is a point from where it is not possible to

continue to develop a “com-positional” presence altogether, which the participants should acknowledge and consequently stop the game, to restart again under the same premises.

With every new attempt, a new “com-position” is inaugurated and developed, a new rhythm is found, new marks are left, new zones are defined, and different intensity levels are created, to form its own consistency, particular to every new encounter, to every new event. The game provides for an experience of a perpetual state of becoming, never consolidated or complete. As life together, it works by approximations to an ideal world that is never achieved and always prone to fail, to be corrupted. This feeling of failure becomes inevitable and revealing about our inescapable faults and perishable nature but is at the same time accompanied by the disclosure of an ethical claim, an ethical impulse that nurtures the search for a life together, and that postpones the end – not as a survival strategy, but as the trigger that opens the possibilities, and gives meaning, to *being-with-one-another-in-the-world*. It is then the seeking to postpone the end by acting responsively in *relation-with* the event at stake that opens us into an ethical claim. This claim projects us, not to a place outside of us – to where we normally project ourselves when rationalizing about ethical dilemmas –, but for the “here and now”. Instead of being spectators of ourselves (in the Cartesian sense of the term), we become active participants in our own present lives. To a certain extent, the game reinforces our experience of the present, our life in the present. A life that, according to Wittgenstein (1916), doesn’t know death, that conquers (even if temporarily) the essential insecurity of the one who is alive, and that keep us away from pragmatic life, to put us in what in us extends as metaphysical beings, and that makes us wonder about our place in the world – “independent from destiny”.¹⁴ By getting us into the becoming of life in the present, the *AND Game* opens the possibilities of transformation of the self by virtue of an ethical demand. A transformation that is not merely spiritual (and therefore abstract) once it is impregnated by the affects¹⁵ of the embodied experience. It is however important to acknowledge that this transformative power doesn’t follow the logic of the subject but of the event itself. It is the desire to connect with the event, with the happening of life, what in turn gives meaning and orientation to the transformation of the self.

14 *Apud* Crespo (2011: 233).

15 Following the Deleuzian sense of the word, “affect” is considered here as “not ... just a feeling or emotion but ... a powerful force influencing the body’s ability to exist” (Semetsky, 2006: 4).



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It is not the intention of the AND_Lab to compose works of art, even if ephemeral, nor reach for objective scientific findings – although the authors admit being possible to achieve both as secondary effects. The intention is to maintain the game, the playing, in the space between subjectivity and objectification, where the ethical impulse is preserved and never established according to any morals, aesthetics or set of fixed rules – where it can be eternal. It is not possible to ignore, though, the artistic aspects of the *AND Game*, including the much compelling embodied act of the participants – that are simultaneously spectators and performers – and (especially) the composite pieces that arise within the game. But that just serves to enhance the unique way in which the artistic experimental practices can combine the dimensions of aesthetics and ethics, in order to achieve life where she is more lost – in her relationship with others and with the world.

By refusing to accept the conventional separations between art and science, experience and fact, subjectivity and objectivity, aesthetics and ethics, AND_Lab places itself in an unregulated territory that puts new tensions on what it means to produce art in the objectified realm of arts today, and that challenges the boundaries of the conventional

artistic categories, particularly within performing arts. It remains to be seen the true implications of this kind of projects in the universe of art, although it is already clear that this project brings the process of artistic composition to a new way of ethical questioning. If, as Efva Lilja (2004: 20) suggested, “form is the foundation for everything that creates meaning”, this project is a persuasive means of creating form for a life that is worth living and a world that is (still) worth fighting for.

UNFINISHED THOUGHTS

In my view, in the last decades, under the prerogative of subjectivity and the (almost normative) operationalization of deconstructionism, many of contemporary performances have been casting a growing shadow over the ability to make (ethico-political) constructive proposals. The problem, of course, is not so much about subjectivity and deconstructionism *per se* (as Derrida himself defended), but the fact that, persistently, many contemporary artists have been finding very hard to evolve from that departing point and keep themselves out from the corners of vagueness and even nihilism. From the spectator’s point of view, this tendency has become the sheer reflection of the dilemma of Rancière’s *The Emancipated Spectator* – in the words of Andy Lavender (2012: 326): “we are free to interpret differently, indeed to act, but to what end?”

Obviously, this situation is not an exclusive prerogative of the performing arts. As noted by Brian Putman (2010), the Western world has not yet been able to think beyond the intellectual consequences of the modernist proposals, and as a result we become paralyzed, around a latent potentiality, without expectation of achievement. We are permanently living a symptom, without being able to establish a horizon of possibilities. This post-modernist idiosyncrasy of looking away from anything that might compromise us ideologically has been turning the attention of the artists, as also stressed by Putman, for everything that exceeds and frames their artistic proposals – for everything that concerns the perception (and very little the conviction). Even the need for the “new”, which remains feverishly attached to the motivations of the artists of our time, does not reveal more than a symptomatic recurrence of today’s nihilistic temptation. By reducing the “new” to the objects that produces, contemporary art has been evading the possibility to reverberate beyond its objectification. This impulsive repetition where

the “newness” of the relationship between the object and its context is purely formal – in the narrower sense of the term – enlarges the unknowable void that separates us from the world. A void that Sartre (2007) called “nothing”, and that can only be tackled by the conscious act of the individual, by the free act by which he/she creates him/herself and his/her world. But many contemporary artists seem to have been avoiding taking risks (even if personal) about the meaning and possibilities of living together, thus manifesting in their works an ethical detachment that perpetuates the same intellectual anguish, the same ethical aporia.

I continue to believe that, as Sartre proclaimed, the human only truly exists when he/she becomes what he/she proposed him/herself to be, and that this demand is the result of a subjective intentionality. Any adoption of a value system that is represented as being “objective” is only an attempt to transfer the personal freedom to the world of objects, thus ending up getting lost in “nothing”. The problem is that, after so much time of individualizing searches, it has been installed a certain alienation of the “other”, of the universal ethics beyond the self. In this context, the search for objectivity, though hopeless (and misleading if allegedly found), is inevitable. This demand is essential to the critical understanding of the world and its history, and to prevent the existential resignation around (what could be seen as) the snob tyranny of subjectivity – however sensual it may seem (Vicente, 2015).

Maybe in reaction to that state of affairs, or simply because the world is urgently demanding more constructive responses, a growing number of artists is starting to flourish, who seem to want to take further away the ethical strengths of their proposals. They have been striving to break free from being eternal hostages of subjectivity and of deconstructionism, though not to refuse them, but to use them as departing points for something that points beyond the subject, and that could resonate in people’s life together.¹⁶ AND_Lab is one of these proposals. More than trying to produce something substantial in the sphere of contemporary arts, the project aims to put in practice a form of training of the critical thinking towards what it means to be human in our relationship with the

16 A significant number of these proposals are sprouting from ecology-based concerns and animist standpoints, overall following the fundamental question of “how on earth do we live?” – as sharply put by Bottoms *et al.* (2012: 1). A compelling example of this kind of proposals is the 2011 Kris Verdonck’s garden installation *Exote*. But several others, like the 2014 cycle of performances conceived by Vera Mantero & Guests called *More or less, but less than more* – comprising a number of journeys through several off-screen urban gardens in Lisbon –, or the ongoing work by Baz Kershaw, from Warwick University, *Earthrise Repair Shop*, are growing as proposals with an ethical responsibility towards what one might call *being-with-one-another-in-the-earth*.

world, in our (responsible) relation with the happening of life. It creates the conditions to exercise the sense of the “ethical” and of the “political” in the context of an artistic laboratory, that is then taken out to the world, through the participants’ affected perception and awareness. And what remains striking, is the acknowledgement of the power of the *AND Game* to (ethically) affect the participants/spectators through the sensible screen of the embodied artistic composition – through the permanent state of becoming art.

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