

# TRADITIONAL AFRICAN PERFORMING ARTS AND THE EMERGENCE OF THE GLORIOUS BODY

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## ABSTRACT

The intention of this essay is to rise up some points and to share my visions with others in the prospect of finding some other colleagues interested in drawing a new path in Performing Arts that aims to maintain, deepen and empower the functions that highly ritualized body practices occupied in traditional African societies. The main questions I want to challenge within this research are:

- Can traditional African Performing Arts be developed to a level, where they stimulate and produce Subjectification?
- Could such Art, thanks to its extra-ordinal nature to everyday world's experience, open a place that stimulates the becoming and happening of truth?
- Could such Art serve as a ground for individual and collective capacitation?

In Part 1 the essay adumbrates what it calls the "bones" of this new body in Performative Arts. The metaphor of "bones" points to what is the supporting structure of a body or in our case of the new form of Art. Bones are also the most durable physical part of an organism which can persist and leave traces even long after its decease. In Part 2 the attention shifts from the bones of this new artistic practice to the social and spacial contexts in which such Art could occur in. The essay concludes in Part 3 with a description of the collaborative mode of production of the Artworks that includes also a reflection about their possible effects and uses. The development of this artistic activity is no less than a trial of reconciliation of humans with their innate capabilities and latent knowledge, which would strengthen also their sense of presence in the world – including being in sync with the rhythms of the Cosmos. At this point, it should be possible to understand why the main goal of this initiative is to build and foster what can be called an "Art of living".

## Preface

My contribution requires a brief introduction with a very personal pledge that I thought as necessary to create a map of shared notions, dots and connections which will later facilitate the placement and the comprehension of the following research.

After completing my academic studies in Milan and after a short but intense career as a digital artist, I decided, in May 2009, to quit my involvement with Art due to some conclusions which I arrived at. As an artist who operated within and on the margins of the Art System, I felt unable to reach those people, whom I primarily wanted to communicate with (the socially under-privileged classes and the ordinary people, who normally don't attend Art events), and incapable to penetrate those everyday situations and imaginaries which I was deeply interested in.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> For some considerations and critics about the Art System, see my essay "A\_tivism" in OtherehtO, Digimag 45 (June 2009), available at: [http://www.digicult.it/digimag/issue-045/a\\_ctivism/](http://www.digicult.it/digimag/issue-045/a_ctivism/)

However, on the long run my too-firm and stubborn decision to completely abandon almost any form of artistic expression ended up not being the right one as it mortified hole regions of my self and divided me from the main means that I was using for experiencing and examining the world around me.

In December 2012 I took the decision to move to Addis Ababa, Ethiopia, because I felt that this will be the right place, where to find traces of authentic or better said spontaneous and culturally embodied forms of artistic expression. I was curious about what an *azmari*<sup>2</sup> performance may look like and felt completely captured by traditional Ethiopian music and dances to the point that, while watching a video of a dance performance, I found my face being completely washed by tears. After this episode, what I was mainly willing to grasp once having the chance to be in tangible contact with traditional Ethiopian dances and *azmari* art was, if it is possible, and if yes, how to keep artistic expression within the realm of everyday life.

### Ethiopia, a culture in change

In Addis Ababa I've experienced a culture, where music, dance and performing arts are still an integrative part of everyday social interactions and where singing and dancing are lived as spontaneous ways of self-expression that can arise during all kinds of situations. At the same time what I've found here is a culture in rapid change that might lose the beauty of its costumes in a very short period of time.

This is a story that Europe has gone through back in the mid-eighteenth and nineteenth century, in the historical period known as Industrialization, a period that caused dramatic changes not only in the mode of production and division of labor, but also in our social costumes and forms of life. Therefore, the delicate moment of social transition and transformation Ethiopia and Africa are now facing needs to be taken with care and carefulness as it opens a perfect ground for the creation of new, but ... What new, which type of "Addis" and who for? History shows us that "new" doesn't necessary mean better and new doesn't need (or let me say it: should not) carry all the "old" and traditional away.

### "Addis" in Traditional African Performing Arts. A perspective with open lines

Traditional African societies can be identified as "presence cultures", where the central self-reference is the body and where the main vocation is inscribing one's body into the natural rhythms of cosmos – a dimension that is very distant from the vocations and laws of "meaning cultures", which Western societies are examples of.<sup>3</sup> The initiative I want to undertake – that will be described in the following part of the essay – wants to recover some elements of traditional presence cultures rituals which, when taken as far as they can go, can produce educational and therapeutical effects.

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<sup>2</sup> An *azmari* is a traditional Ethiopian singer and musician, who is skilled in improvised compositions of verses.

<sup>3</sup> For the concept of presence and meaning cultures, see Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht, *Production of presence. What meaning cannot convey* (Stanford, 2004).

I will conclude this preface with a slightly provoking hypothesis. If the Western meaning cultures, obsessed with knowledge, interpretation and attribution of meaning, were able to produce the Information era of mass information technologies and electronic gadgetry, couldn't we then speculate that a revitalized presence culture might be able to generate a Wellness era, an era of glorious bodies engaged in care & cure performances?

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After having grasped this powerful vision, let me try to penetrate its image and peep into its materiality. Therefore, I will proceed by describing the bones of this new body in Arts engaged in what can be called an Art of living.

The backbone is constituted from **Maieutics**, the pedagogical approach based on the assumption that truth and potentials are latent in every human being due to innate knowledge and capabilities, but have to be “given birth” by answering intelligently proposed questions or by being taken through wisely arranged tasks. The role of the performers is to assist others in such delivery by formulating multidirectional inquiries that stimulate critical thinking and debate. This activity follows the principle of truth-telling (*parrhêsia*), a moral paradigm of great importance in Ancient Greek and Roman culture, which takes in this case an artistic turn. Thus, the truth-telling task gets carried out by using open-ended narratives, performative scenes and visual representations, which are employed firstly, to facilitate inductive reasoning and secondly, to render such practice more enjoyable and attractive for a large number of people. What do I refer to exactly when talking about truth-telling? Truth-telling consist in telling all the truth about yourself, your experiences and opinions without hiding any part of it. We all know that speaking frankly and sincerely in one's own name involves certain risks, since truth may hurt and irritate others and can even bring your interlocutors to break the relationship with you. This is a possible scenario performers of the Art of living might have to deal with during their work.

The description of the spinal column of Maieutics has arrived to an end. I shall now introduce you to the other four remaining bones – **Aesthetic Experience, Repetition, Improvisation** and **Rituals** – that will be described one by one.

The goal of every Art is to produce **Aesthetic Experience** and the artistic initiative I aim to develop shares this same ambition. However, in this case the aesthetic experience would not be employed neither for bare entertainment, nor for *Art pour Art* purposes; instead it would be used for enhancing the explorative, educational and auto-therapeutic scopes of the Art of living. Art can then create a counter-environment, where we can reproduce and reshape situations, discourses and things of the world so to form and examine new types of relationships, modes of existence and meanings.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Here I am inspired by the Phd Thesis “Outline of a Subversive Technopoetic. The Lexicon” written in August 2012 by Francesco Monico.

**Repetition** will be an essential part of this Art as it first of all creates the sense of homeness needed for maximum relaxation. The performances will rotate around a limited number of themes that will be inquired repeatedly, yet with different approaches and from various starting points. Nevertheless, some performative elements, the so-called breaking nodes of the research, will be dealt with again and again. Here the repetition will not be lived as a limitation or routine, but as a ground that facilitates participation and self-mirroring and, as a consequence, enables the emergence of unexpected developments and involuntary knowledge.

The bone of **Improvisation** is a necessary element for maintaining the openness and interactivity of the performative pièces and the performers have to be trained so to become wise enough to understand which aspect of the research needs to be focused on and when. In this passage it is necessary to analyze a bit further the figure of the performer engaged in an Art of living.

To begin with, the performer of this Art is not professional. The requested qualification for undertaking such role is not given by an institution and does not refer to the possession of some spiritual powers or academic knowledge. What the performers need to have most of all is the ability and the virtue of truth-telling, which is not something that we learn at school. In doing such Art, they operate mainly as a sort of inquirers, who undertake an experiential, emotional and discursive research on the chosen theme. Their language make use of the most direct and clear forms of expression as possible; no space for riddles or vague and allusive discourses. Contrary to the art of Rhetoric, the function of the performers is not to demonstrate truth, nor to convince others about something, but to induce oneself and others in critical thinking and (self-)questioning so to open human eyes and hearts to be able to see and to care more clearly. They never take the part of the ones who hold knowledge or answers. Their function is only to support others in the search of truth and not to pose a definite conclusion. This practice alludes to the idea that for telling the truth you need the presence of other people, as Nietzsche argues “Alone one is always in the wrong, but with two the truth begins”<sup>5</sup>.

Finally, **Rituals** have the power of making latent or distant objects tangible. This capacity serves to create magic moments of suspense that permit us to overcome temporal and spacial limitations. Thanks to such perspective shift, which would be accompanied by, for example, repetitive music rhythms and body movements, we get the possibility to go beyond the rational and the logical. This can bring us to another level of being in which we can look into and intervene directly on the psyche and on the personal and collective unconscious. A ritual experience of the things of the world can result also in a release of stacked energies – those behavioral and mental patterns that would be useful to get rid of.

The pediatric overview of the bones is now concluded and therefore, it is time to shift to the situational framework within which this new body in Arts could perform in.

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<sup>5</sup> Nietzsche F., *La Gaia Scienza*, a. 260.

## II

I see this Art taking place in performance houses similar to “*azmari bets*” with a large plateau or agora placed in the middle of the space, where there would be no curtain or other type of physical barrier between the actors (performers) and the interlocutors (those who would be in other Performative Arts referred to as public). The idea behind such spacial arrangement is that you can enter the arena and join the performance whenever you feel like to. The environment inside such places would be simple and cosy, with an interior design that would not end in driving your attention away from the happening in the agora. There would be no entrance fee and the retribution would be left on a voluntary base, like in most *azmari*'s and traditional dancers' performances, so to maintain the Art of living economically accessible to anyone as this is a precondition for attracting people from all kind of backgrounds, professions and social classes.

The Art of living *performance bet* would function as a non-institutional platform, where people can publicly investigate their questions, problems and fears. Such horizontally organized plateau could offer a valid alternative to all those practices and institutions of modern society “*which are organized and developed later around some famous couples: the penitent and the confessor, the person being guided and the spiritual director, the sick person and the psychiatrist, the patient and the psychoanalyst*”.<sup>6</sup> By opening a space for personal and collective capacitation that overflies the silly intermezzo of institutional apparatuses of power and control, the activity of taking-care – of oneself, of others and of the world we live in – would be taken upon people's shoulders as their own duty and responsibility.

## III

After having analyzed the bones and the contextual coordinates of this new Performative Art, let us return to the question of what kind of Artworks does the Art of living aim to produce and what are be the possible effects and uses of such manifestations.

The work of Art will undoubtedly consist of performances, but what type of performances and based on what? As already mentioned before, their structure would rely on five bones – Maieutics, Aesthetic Experience, Repetition, Improvisation and Rituals – which are described in Part 2 of the essay. Regarding the contents of these Artworks, I see a possible repertoire of performative pièces that interrogate general questions which touch the majority of people, as for example “What does it mean to love something or someone?”, “Who is a woman/who is a man?”, “Do I fear death and if yes, why?”. The performances could also undertake some socio-political inquires like “What to do if we are without a job (*sra yelem*)?”, “What to do if we are without a house (*bet yelem*)?” or “Who is a stranger (*farenji*) and why?”.

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<sup>6</sup> Foucault M., *The Courage of Truth: The Government of Self and Others II; Lectures at the Collège de France, 1983-1984*

The mode of production of an Art of living artwork consists of three developments. In the first phase, the performers have to choose the theme around which the inquiry will rotate. At this stage the research is undertaken both in theoretical and pragmatic terms so to keep it as wide and rich as possible. The outcomes of this activity get later refined and reshaped in artistic expression laboratories that occur between small groups of people. After having produced a necessary amount of experience, knowledge and artistic expressions, the analysis is brought to a community life context, where it is shared and built together with occasional interlocutors – the participants of the staged performances. In this second phase of an Artwork's development, the participants are addressed to form and pose their own questions and suggestions, which should be inspired and driven by real personal experiences. This communal truth-telling practice is kept well documented so to be able to follow and trace its results. These could be after a certain amount of time reorganized in a manner that is clear and powerful enough for a public sphere diffusion which would be achieved also through the use of mass media technologies. To summarize, this three-staged structure is necessary for reaching and affecting all contexts of human life.

Before the end of this essay I want to spend some more words on the usability of this new body in Arts. Already in the first part of the essay I explained why the production of aesthetic objects and effects is not the final goal of the Art of living. Counterposed to this, what such Art tries to achieve is a functional employment of the means of artistic expression. By stimulating a cathartic exposure of the self, the Art of living invites both the participants and the performers to discover the truth that is latent in every person and situation. Such truth-telling process can be very useful firstly, to demolish social taboos and stereotypes, secondly to reveal and reshape the individual and transindividual conscious and unconscious and, last but not least, to reinforce the sense of community and of "being in the world". The Art of living then, becomes primarily a subversive and liminal practice for educational, community building and auto-curative needs.