


**TO SAVE THE BEASTS:  
La Bête and Brazil eight years later**

PARA SALVAR OS BICHOS:  
La Bête e o Brasil oito anos depois

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**Abstract:** The article revisits Wagner Schwartz's performance *La Bête*, eight years after the controversy it sparked in 2017, analyzing its formal procedures in the light of the critical reception accumulated during the period, as well as taking into account the artist's autobiographical novel written and published in 2023. Throughout the critical analysis, it will be revealed how its three basic procedures – interruption, suspension and transformation – can serve as models for reflecting on the country's socio-political conflicts, but also on the status of contemporary art itself in the face of current impasses.

**Keywords:** contemporary art; art criticism; far right; critical theory; psychoanalysis

**Para salvar os bichos:**

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**Resumo:** O artigo retorna à performance *La Bête*, de Wagner Schwartz, oito anos depois da deflagração de sua polêmica em 2017, analisando os seus procedimentos formais face à fortuna crítica acumulada durante o período, assim como levando em conta o romance autobiográfico escrito pelo artista e lançado em 2023. Ao longo da análise crítica, serão revelados como os seus três procedimentos basilares – a interrupção, a suspensão e a transformação – podem servir como modelos para pensar o país e os seus conflitos sócio-políticos, mas também o próprio estatuto da obra de arte contemporânea frente aos impasses atuais.

**Palavras-chave:** arte contemporânea; crítica de arte; extrema direita; Teoria Crítica; psicanálise.



Wagner Schwartz's performance *La Bête* premiered in a Brazil in turmoil, although it suddenly became historic, not only because of its unique formal revival of Brazil's old modernist forces, but also because it was interrupted and attacked by a far-right movement on the rise during 2017. The artist was accused of pedophilia and persecuted, fell into a state of depression and went into self-exile in Paris. Curators involved in the performance or in similar controversies had to testify at a CPI on Maltreatment organized by the legislature. All of this was indeed catastrophic, perhaps less because of its immediate consequences than because it was a predictive index of what was to follow.

However, during the study, this researcher sensed that, despite all the commotions and brutal events involved in the case, the aesthetic structure of the work already contained the germ of what would happen to it in an unaesthetic way. It will therefore be the theoretical and analytical consequences of this idea that I will unfold in this article, reassessing the work's trajectory eight years after its interruption. To do this, it was necessary to make a critical assessment of the critical reception accumulated since then, as well as to bring up one of its most recent products, the autobiographical novel *A nudez da cópia imperfeita* (The Nakedness of the Imperfect Copy), written by Schwartz himself and released in 2023. The central hypothesis is that if the researcher were able to retroactively introject the social event into the aesthetic event, and vice versa, he might be able to reposition the work in relation to the aesthetic desire that its structure formalizes.

What makes *La Bête* different from all the works that were attacked by the Brazilian far-right at the same time<sup>1</sup>, is that the indices of the unaesthetic interruptions that hit it were inscribed in its aesthetic structure from the outset. In fact, the historical content unveiled by the only apparently external crossings belong – not only at that time, but even today – to the truth content of the work. Thus, over the years, it has become the privileged example that one of the legitimate forms of existence of contemporary art lies in sustaining the possibility of suppressing its own aesthetic existence.

The problem is that the controversy surrounding *La Bête* brought together many superficial discourses, quite distinct from the experiential complexity triggered by the interruption of the work. This discursive armor, inflated by the affections of the time, obfuscated any proper analysis. That's why, eight years on, we must try to break through this armor. Of the co-optations of public discourse, we can isolate three: one in the reactionary camp and two in the progressive camp. While the reactionaries, relying on the speed and apparent immediacy of the social networks, indulged in homicidal impulses sublimated in obtuse jargon drawn from old Christian morality and the global *New Right*, the progressive camp found itself caught between the pole dominated by journalism and the pole of left-wing liberal sensibility, the latter concerned about the health of democracy and believing that the problem, if it wasn't among those who believe themselves to be on the right side of history, had to be in the eternal censorship of eternal art.

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1 Such as *O evangelho segundo Jesus, rainha do céu* (2016), by Renata Carvalho, and *DNA de DAN* (2017), by Maikon K.



The mass of news, criticism and commentary has become so monstrous<sup>2</sup> that, over the years, it's not even surprising that few of these discourses have touched the heart of the problem. But what the historical distance, the analysis of the accumulated critical reception and Schwartz's novel make us realize is that through *La Bête* the ghost of Lygia Clark – its main inspiration – was not just beaten up; it came back to collect its revenge in the best style: it broke the work of art again – and literally.

It was the artist himself who understood, more than many of his defenders, that the interruption of *La Bête* was not an accident external to the work, but its immanent element. In the book *A nudez da cópia imperfeita*, which was written based on both the work and its controversy, Schwartz (2023, p. 49) writes: “[After the interruption] the performance continued to be articulated, but in a different way to what Lygia Clark and I had proposed”. There are two fundamental theoretical ideas here: firstly, the artist states that the work desires and speaks beyond the intentions of the cultural agents engaged in its culturally healthy circulation; secondly, the metaphysical idea that Lygia lives on, despite being dead. Perhaps they did, in fact, create the piece together; they worked in that unheard of dimension that the confluence of desires inaugurates. But there is a third intuition, just as important: that the novel, written six years later, is an inextricable part of the formal history of *La Bête*: “The fact is that the various reactions to the images of the performance changed the direction of the story I had been writing until then, they created this book. Would such a change be the most important element of this narrative?” (Schwartz, 2023, p. 122). Then the most important realization dawns: the artist concludes that his art, “so unimpressive to the media, was born dead. It took the enemy to discover it for it to come to life” (Schwartz, 2023, p. 122); and furthermore, that “this category of art is dispensable for the world of consumption. In fact, to make the headlines, only through scandals” (Schwartz, 2023, p. 19).

One of the most touching moments in the story of *La Bête* lies in the fictitious letter that Lygia Clark's ghost wrote from the beyond and sent to Schwartz. In the missive of December 2, 2017 – transcribed in Schwartz's novel – Clark affectionately confirms the artist's impressions. It's as if this alone had the power to reassure him; after all, he did his job, he did what he could. So wrote the ghost:

My dear Wagner, it's a joy to have you by my side. [...] Don't forget, I was present at every one of your performances. I died to see it happen. *La Bête* is the action I imagined for the body and the object; it couldn't be any other way. It's not just about creating an object. An object has no value. They give it a value because they can't guarantee an action. Action has no cost, my dear, it's free. Body for the body's sake, or whatever that phrase means. In any case, I continue to work with relational objects. I am each one of them now. And this internet, which I never knew in life, has given me the opportunity to be a cloud too. The materials have changed. If before I used to spread objects over people's bodies, today I work directly on the senses, where I always wanted to be. Death gave me this gift; do you understand now? Finally, I'd like to say to you: perhaps you've given too much of yourself to this contingency called contemporary art. There are

2 Most of these texts are on the artist's official website. See link at: (Schwartz, 2023).



serious risks to be experienced when a work leaves a museum. If *Bicho* was taken out of people's hands so that it wouldn't be destroyed, imagine a performance? That word seems to be my age, but that's between us. Folding and unfolding *La Bête* keeps the sculpture active; if its joints are destroyed, there will no longer be a *Bicho* on stage, just a wounded body. But beyond the impostures, we also have to celebrate what has happened. I would celebrate the era of replicas, what remains of my inaugural work. Two thousand and seventeen kisses to you, Lygia (Schwartz, 2023, p. 143-144).

The ghost was well-aimed. The delicacy with which the artist chose to work with a plastic miniature of one of Lygia's *Bichos* – originally made with metal sheets, much larger and heavier – would not necessarily supplant the paths inscribed in the history of Clark's work. It's just that, like other contemporary artists in their mature and more radical phase – including Hélio Oiticica, her friend and confidant – Lygia wanted the work of art to break down, so that its lines could be inscribed, both concretely and virtually, on the surface of the world. The concepts and procedures she used were mainly the *organic line* – a technique developed to break the transcendental framework of artistic devices by inventing others, immanent to the happenstance of color –; the *body* as the ultimate support for the creative gesture; and the notion of *relationship* elevated to paroxysm, putting the very notion of aesthetic experience at risk. Like Hélio, Lygia was also an eminent theoretician. She was fully aware of the different structural dimensions coexisting in the work of art. No wonder she studied psychoanalysis and, during the last years of her life, developed a de facto therapy. That's why she wrote the following conclusion in the 1978 text "The Relational Object": "[During therapy], we thus witness the rupture of the frontier between body and fantasy" (Clark, 1978). When Lygia speaks of fantasy, she knows the psychoanalytic implications of the concept. And when she talks about the body, she brings it closer, in her own way, to what the psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan called the Real. Lacan defines it negatively, confronting it with the notion of "reality",

because reality is constituted by all the halts that human symbolism, in a more or less perspicacious fashion, passes around the neck of the real in so far as it makes of them the objects of its experience". The specific property of objects of experience is precisely to leave in some way [...] everything that escapes from it in the object. (LACAN, 2016, p. 512).

In Clark's grammar, therefore, bringing together the Real – identified by her as an original kind of synesthetic carnality<sup>3</sup> – and fantasy, until a total blend of the two dimensions was achieved, meant proceeding with a revolution in sensibility. Lygia says: "The R. O. [relational object] may thus be considered an object that annihilates itself" (Clark, 1978). Thus, it will be through the struggle against the appearance of the art object that the boundaries between fantasy and the Real can merge into a fertilizing confusion. This destructive force, which according to Lygia "dilutes the notion of [pictorial] surface" (Clark, 1978), should annihilate the autonomy of art as it points to

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<sup>3</sup> It is important to note that this positive view of the Real, that is, identifying it with the carnality of the human body, as it appears in Lygia, is foreign to Lacanian psychoanalytic formulations, where the Real is of a negative order. In fact, a study of Clark's theory leads us to believe that her psychoanalytic reading was mainly informed by Freudian theory, in which the notion of the Real as established by Lacan had not yet been formulated.



the revelation of a scene external to the appearance of the work, in which a “language of the body” will be inscribed that is necessarily ethical, not necessarily aesthetic. It will therefore be up to the artist to construct less an art object than a device called a *relational object*: an “anti-work of art” that “abolishes any kind of support” (Clark, 1978). In fact, in her late technique – which devoured and digested all previous artistic practice – Lygia no longer even spoke in terms of aesthetic experience: she spoke of healing. For her, the encounter with the relational object should bring about the “experience of living a totalized unity as life-experience” (Clark, 1978). In this praxis, it is clear that “neither spectator nor object need exist” (Clark, 1978), since, in the act of the clinical experience, the body touched by the object is no longer a spectator – except of itself – while the object, at the very moment of its use, is sacrificed in favor of the patient’s “structuring of the self” (Clark, 1978). In short, the relational object is produced to be annihilated in the fire of “life-experience”. Art must set art on fire.

No matter how the ideology that emerges from Lygia’s work is read, what stands out is the evidence of a desire that not only ran through the artist, but subsisted beyond her. This is the kind of thing that reading Lygia’s residual fantasy reveals. It was this fantastical residue, preserving desire like a fossil immersed in amber that, traveling through the decades on the rails of a country’s symbolic order, was finally incorporated into the genesis of *La Bête*. Lygia’s scene was incarnated in Schwartz’s scene. But while the scenes of the two artists are unconscious and identify with each other, their devices, on the other hand, are quite different, since it is in their nature to be profoundly historical. The Real of the two works is also very different, of course: they are two “Brazils” – two holes – even though, hovering above or below them, the ghosts (this is the name we will give, in this article, to the specifically aesthetic signifiers) of one era communicate with those of the other. They persist as all ghosts persist, although they float between historically dissimilar devices and fantasies.

In a 1929 critical essay dedicated to defending Villa-Lobos’ still misunderstood music, the young Mário Pedrosa – who years later would become one of the main supporters of neoconcretism, and a great friend of Lygia’s – fervently believed in the ghosts that constituted the fantasy of an entire generation. The critic was inspired by the imaginary impetus of the first Brazilian modernism. In his brilliant prose, a certain primitivism set the tone:

Perhaps Brazilians are able to evoke at random whatever part of Brazil has entered the artist’s imagination as nature, as a living thing, acting upon it and allowing it to help shape their sensibility: the popular dances and rondos beneath the palm trees and stars of the Northeastern beaches, the beat of the *catéretê*! at the forest’s edge, the macumbas? and witchcraft of the blacks on the outskirts of cities, the *serestas* [serenades] and *choros* in the cities, the traditions and felicitous improvisations of Carnival in the capitals, etc... . Or even something more vague within the Brazilian vastness. ... Things from deep in the woods: the mysterious Brazilian forest, filled with familiar legends and demons, where the wildcat lives with the Great Snake and the legendary descendants of tribal hero Macunaíma, and the great rivers, majestic and deep, these great, fantastic beings that have always inspired childhood fear, attraction, and worship in Brazilians, from the depths of which rise enchanted palaces, dwellings of “Iara”—the mother of the waters, with her green hair, our god-mother, etc. ... (Pedrosa, 2023, p. 35).



Although it is clear that many of these ghosts persist unscathed and with renewed insistence in the fantasy of today's art system, the spectral residues of this first modernism have undergone various mutations when they were incorporated, first in the work of an artist marked by neoconcretism, and then in a contemporary performance. This was one of the reasons for the uncontrollable flood of fantasies triggered by the abduction of a fragment of the piece by the Real of a country, taking such unexpected and catastrophic turns: the ghosts were countless and wild. But all this chaos, as we believe, is still part of the work. Just as in Lygia's work, the desire for radical heteronomy – that is, for dissolution in the social world – was inscribed in the autonomous genesis of *La Bête*.

The performance fantasy proved to be ambiguous right from the start of the creation process. If, in the intimacy of the studio, it gradually emerged as an embroidery sewn onto a rag, then, when it came into contact with the cultural apparatus of exhibition, it became a small curatorial jewel. Precariousness and glamour – these two aspects have never ceased to coexist. It all came about in 2005, during an untimely encounter with one of the *Bichos*.

While visiting the city's galleries, I came across one of Lygia Clark's *Bichos* sculptures, displayed inside a glass cube. It was bigger than my hands, made of metal, and had around eight flat, pointed parts like weathered shirt collars. In France, *Bichos* can be called *Bêtes*. When they were created in the 1960s, they allowed the different parts of their body to be articulated by means of their hinges. In exhibitions, they would only fulfill their function as a work of art when the public participated. When I saw a trapped *Bicho*, I promised him and myself that I would release his body from the cube, so that the relationship between the object and people could be resumed. [...] It would be impossible, however, to release that sculpture from there. I thought: "I'm going to become a *Bicho*" (Schwartz, 2023, p. 43).

That year, the artist still couldn't have known that his self-prophecy would be fulfilled, albeit by crooked means. By freeing the sculpture from its glass cage, giving it autonomy and incorporating it, Wagner freed not only the animal, but the beast – a sense of *bête* whose absence from the artist's discourse is perhaps not accidental. The autonomous and aloof voice of the beast, almost monstrous, had already been inoculated by Lygia decades before: "When people asked her how many movements a *Bicho* could make, she [Lygia] would reply: 'I don't know, you don't know, but he does'" (Schwartz, 2023, p. 43-44). Knowing this well, Wagner addresses the reader of the novel decades later: "Before I continue with my questions, we'll see how the *Bicho* can give answers" (Schwartz, 2023, p. 44). But the *Bicho* had already given them. And if it took the artist so many years to be able to hear and write them down, it's because the fantasy he embroidered – in other words, the dimension that, according to Lacanian psychoanalysis, would give him a floor, a ceiling and a north – had been woven with fabrics that were as delicate as they were fragile. Among many other factors, the artist, like many Brazilian artists, was relatively poor – although he had his connections. That's how the meeting at an art collector's house, just twenty days after the interruption of the piece, could become an exemplary anecdote, revealing how the equation that links fantasy to the artistic device often depends less on ideas than on financial backing. If it hadn't been for the wealthy collector's refusal to accept the conditions Wagner had



requested for the sale of his work, part of the recent history of contemporary art would have been different. The artist tells us:

Álvaro Marinho [the collector] was attentive. [...] He was staying with his family in a hotel next to the Champs-Élysées. I was greeted for breakfast with a hug and a good morning in Brazilian Portuguese which, at that moment, did me a lot of good. We talked about the country with which we shared aesthetic and political interests. The scenario before us was worrying: the removal of a left-wing government, the rise of the far right. Antagonistic themes were part of the breakfast, although the aim was to create a relationship between the gallery and my work. I thanked him. I asked for some time to think. About to say goodbye, Álvaro said he had a *Bicho* in his collection. At the same time as feeling that I could be close to one of the sculptures I most appreciate in the world, I let it slip: “How much did you pay for it?” “One million and eight hundred thousand dollars” (Schwartz, 2023, p. 138).

Wagner didn’t have one million and eight hundred thousand dollars at that time, nor had he ever, not even at the time of the initial impulse. But if the artist is hardly ever rich, he has to be creative; a fantasy can be built with the most ordinary material: “[After Lygia’s death], plastic replicas were created from her sculptures, but they did not even receive the popular prices of the street markets. Death delegates functions: it inflates. Annoyed, I bought a replica in the shape of a crab” (Schwartz, 2023, p. 13). So this was the possible fantasy that the artist had in his hands; a chocking pink plastic fantasy that he would be obliged to pass on to the public as an authentic art object, transforming it, through illusionist gestures, into a little jewel.

From this, *La Bête* was born as a minimal, delicate and iridescent piece. Devoid of shadows, it was reminiscent of the modernism that contributed to its conception. Neither classical nor pop, it was simply contemporary, precisely because it was intimately – dangerously – close to the upheavals of the present moment – as Giorgio Agamben (2009) argued in his renowned lecture “What is the contemporary?”. *La Bête* bore no irony, although it was open to all; it was not willfully postmodern, therefore. And its modernism, in the moment of public fruition, ended up confined to citation. The work was so simple that its description fit elegantly within the statement the artist was compelled to give to an officer at São Paulo’s 4th Police Precinct for the Repression of Pedophilia: “I was lying on a cardboard mat with a plastic object in my hands. My body was available to be manipulated by people” (Schwartz, 2023, p. 119). To this day, no more precise description of the piece has been offered – neither in news reports nor in reviews – because, in fact, that was all that constituted its empirical materiality and beauty. In it, the literal minimal surpassed any parodic minimalism.

It is therefore essential to ask why there has been so much commotion around the work. Nudity and a child touching an adult’s naked body – the triggers for the controversy – are certainly important ghosts in stirring up social fantasies, but they are not essential. When sociological aspects are used, as they have been, as irrefutable justifications for theoretical explanations, doubt must prevail. It’s best to study the interior of the work, finding holes through which worlds cross. Thus, there must be some structural procedure that, when encountering social crossings, has entered into a process of mutation, like a rebellious cell.



In the article *A violência de um gesto* (The violence of a gesture), Renan Marcondes (2021) articulates the hypothesis that, in certain historical contexts, a politics of activity can be less politically effective than a certain politics of passivity. For him, it was *La Bête*'s extreme passivity that determined its violent fate, while at the same time denouncing the systemic violence of an entire country. Based on a reading of Walter Benjamin, Marcondes (2021, p. 4) states that if the “most radical political action would be of the order of the gesture”, this would correspond to an “interruption of action”. The diagnosis is elegant: “What was at the same time the most violated performance and the one most accused of violence is, in fact, constituted by an almost absolute passivity on the part of the artist” (Marcondes, 2021, p. 8). In this way, *La Bête* “only exposes violence”, dismantling and distorting its socially naturalized function of use. From this we can deduce that the critical character of the piece, in other words, its real strength, appeared simultaneously with the revelation of the violence perpetrated against the work itself; for it is “a strength that only opens up space” (Marcondes, 2021, p. 17). By denying the imperative of production, the suspension of efficacy inaugurates an “open space of interruption and suspension” (Marcondes, 2021, p. 19).

With these arguments, Marcondes reaches the procedural core of *La Bête* without having to isolate the work in a formalist or historicist parenthesis, as has been the case in many of the comments; nor does he incur the temptation to make “victimistic” apologies for the wounded integrity of art or culture. The article proves that art's heteronomy and autonomy need not be self-excluding aspects. Most importantly, however, it is also clear that *interruption* and *suspension* are the two core procedures of the work.

It was these cells that entered a process of accelerated mutation, putting the very body of the work at risk. The fact is that the force of interruption, if accepted, leads to impasses whose logical closure paradoxically opens the way to new logics. But this mutation was only possible because each procedure, starting with the explosion of the work, opened up in a mirrored pair whose terms resonated dramatically with each other: if the *interruption*, in the aesthetic event, consisted of the staged passivity of the artist – that is, in a certain way of presenting itself as a yes that hides a no, and vice versa – on the other hand, as a social event it came in the form of an atavistic and chaotic violence, but mainly active. As for *suspension*, if as an aesthetic event it resided in the durational isolation of physical gestures for the emancipatory transformation of their meaning (the poses imposed on the artist's body by the public), in the social event it was embodied in the procedure of extracting a single image – that of the child's touch on the artist's naked body –, its elevation to digital clouds and its progressive manipulation according to the prevailing fantasies in dispute. This is how the *La Bête* event sparked, among other things, a kind of semiological delirium whose traces, if mapped in all their breadth, would reveal a lot about the geopolitical – and why not, affective – map of the country. It's just as Wagner wrote (2023, p. 198): “I rubbed the map of Brazil all over my body”.

In short, the aesthetic device of the work was already inscribed with its ethical meaning from the outset: everything called for the outbreak of impasses. After all, no one who wants



to avoid vulnerability would put themselves in the position that the artist has assumed in the work. The history of performance art itself is full of devices whose core is the transformation of bodily fragility into aesthetic power. It turns out that the Schwartzian fantasy – as well as being ambiguous in its way of stretching between objective precariousness and curatorial glamor – encountered another kind of real: the Brazilian one, that of the third millennium and the neoliberal era.

In a first movement, the work was interrupted after a fragment of its conscious scene – a video, recorded by a friend of the artist – was singled out and published on the internet, its unconscious scene. In a second movement, the work was suspended, in the double sense of the word: at the same time as it had to stop the machinery of the device, its ghosts continued to run around the world, penetrating the most disparate and conflicting fantasies; they became the suspended elements of a boiling substance called 21st century Brazil, in which, in the words of Eliane Brum (2018), “fiction has become obsolete” because “everything is reality”.

The three times of *La Bête* – interruption, suspension and transformation – are therefore the scansion of its syntax. This machinic chain is what guaranteed the strong link between the faces of the aesthetic event and the social event, even though the spectacle, as the fetishistic dimension of the work, had been reduced to dust. The exact point of the interruption could not be determined empirically, because it took place simultaneously inside and outside, during and after the spectacular device: if the girl touching the artist next to her mother, in the middle of the show, was just one figure, among many others, of the interruption stimulated by the staged passivity of the artistic device, when published on social networks it became a phantasmatic image that triggered an unexpected interruption in the aesthetic system, although it was just as eloquent as its previous form. The thing is, the work continued to happen; the scene just spread monstrously around the world. So much so that the overexposure of a small ghost – as simple as that image – was enough for the curatorial apparatus, in this case the Museum of Modern Art (MAM) in São Paulo, beset by institutional threats, to force the gears of the artistic apparatus to stop, in such a way as to make us question, today, whether this fear is really a good political advisor.

The museum’s *Position Statement* was institutionally assertive, but historically regressive. Apart from all the official information aimed at calming tempers – although, as we now know, to no avail – what matters is the aesthetic and ethical content of the statement. In an attempt to placate the unbearable scene outside its walls, the institutional device ends up contradicting the very work it bought and exhibited, as we read in a certain laconic passage which, if it could go unnoticed in institutional readings, in an analytical reading becomes the nodal point. The museum claims that “the work presented on the occasion has no erotic content and was limited to an interpretative reading of Lygia Clark’s work *Bicho*” (Schwartz, 2023, p. 21), when in fact – as I argue – it is precisely the opposite: the work is deeply erotic *because* it was not limited to an interpretative reading of *Bichos*; it was its unlimited *incarnation*. In other words: in its diplomatic attempt to separate real eroticism from the allusion to pedophilia, the museum ended up legitimizing the



reactionaries' fantastical imposition: it merged the two images into one – an erotic pedophilia or a pedophile eroticism – and claimed not to have perpetrated it. Thereby, the event itself was once again violated: its two greatest powers, concrete eroticism and the incarnation of modernism, were transformed into the very obscenity to be shamefully concealed. Here, then, is a political message that recent history provides: what currently coordinates many institutions committed to “stimulating a constructive, tolerant and pluralistic dialog with all segments of society in order to strengthen culture and our democracy” – as the MAM note states – is fear. It turns out that “all segments of society”, in their plurality, seem to show us just the opposite: it is not – and never has been – possible to talk to a fascist; a fascist must be fought.

But in order to do so, we would have to assume the singular temporality of the conflict. It turns out that it is extremely difficult to sustain such a suspension. Because it is a time on the edge of timelessness, it demands an increasingly rare ethical force, when it is a certain “ontology of acceleration” (Lepecki, 2006) that governs public and private life equally. Sustaining suspension, therefore, would mean sustaining all the conflicting forces involved in an impasse. Embracing conflict, not denying it.

In *La Bête*, suspension – like interruption – has two procedural sub-figures: one conscious and the other unconscious. If in the scene of the artistic device, the image of the artist's body appears as a ghost *willingly* open to manipulation, in the scene of the social world, that same ghost appears *unwillingly* open to manipulation. Thus, the procedure remains the same – only the signs are reversed. Only in this second time the ghost is no longer the image of the trio; the image of the artist's body, now alone, is detached from the concrete bulkhead – the *frame* transformed into a *mime* – and becomes pure virtuality, an incorporeal body thrown back and forth over the convulsive arena of the Brazilian territory. The metaphor comes from the artist himself:

I was killed on the internet. I'm a witness. [...] Now, I write like one browses. The experience of writing without a body is curious. [...] If you read aloud or put the timbre of my voice in your head, you will be able to participate in the events that transformed my body into a kind of shuttlecock, thrown into the air by opposing hits (Schwartz, 2023, p. 11).

In order for the abstraction necessary for suspension to take place, the artist had to be symbolically killed. This behavior, which refers to the atavistic ritual dimension of humanity, is also the trans-historical repetition of a threshold inherent to the symbolic regime.

A signifier, as Lacan (1995; 1998) explains, is the presence of an absence. In order for a language to be articulated, the empirical world must be dematerialized, a procedure carried out by words. The same is true of images. As Agamben (2012) reminds us, the word image comes from the Latin *imago*. As this was the name given to the death masks of the ancient Latin peoples, the etymological proximity of the notion of image to the notion of ghost becomes ontological: in every image there is an ongoing afterlife (Agamben, 2012). This is what guarantees the astonishing speed of contemporary simulacra.



In his book “The superindustry of the imaginary”, Eugênio Bucci (2021) describes what he calls “public telespace” as a virtual territory superimposed on geographical territory and governed by the “tyranny of images”. These, inaugurating a “zero space” and a “zero time” (Bucci, 2021) - that is, the simultaneous and the instantaneous, respectively – order public life in all its scope. Bucci (2021, p. 39) concludes: “History is no longer written, history is drawn”. Indeed, the entire algorithmic evolution of social networks – formerly more open to text, now centered on images – confirms this diagnosis. But if it is in the digital cloud that public life starts to happen, such events will be, according to Bucci (2021, p. 64), zombie events: “A scene lingers in the air and thus makes the event last in a state of *happening*, in an elastic temporality”. The suspension of *La Bête*, therefore, did not mean that the work stopped; from that point it simply began another journey – “*La Bête* has gone to a better place” (Schwartz, 2023, p. 12) – in the afterlife of *another scene*, the digital clouds: “There was no burial, nor will there be: the internet invented eternity” (Schwartz, 2023, p. 42). It will therefore be within this suspended temporality of “telespacial” eternity that the third time of *La Bête* will begin: the time of transformations.

If in the first two periods there was not much that could be done about the direction of the event – since the interventions came mostly from outside – the third period would be the place from which to create strategies to pursue the paths of desire embedded in the work. Because what was at stake from then on, in the huge Brazilian arena, was the dispute over the significance of the image of the artist’s body. A conflict of fantasies broke out.

But the kick-off for this cycle of transformations was once again predicted decades earlier by Lygia herself. When she presented a rubber version of *Bicho* to her friend and then already famous art critic Mário Pedrosa, he “kicked *Trepante* and said: ‘at long last one can kick a work of art!’ I loved that!” (Schwartz, 2023, p. 24). Wagner incorporated this possibility as the core of his device. Being able to manipulate him as they wished – limited, however, by the opacity, weight and elasticity of his flesh, bones and tendons – the audience imposed their unconscious fantasies on the work’s conscious scene. However, when he died to the concrete world and moved on to the virtual one, his body no longer set limits to the projections. That’s why his body became an infinite laboratory for experimentation. The artist’s body and the country’s territory became confused: in a way, the interruption of the work merged the two into a kind of pure mythical body, susceptible to multiple significant inscriptions. Thus, the passage and the open distance between the transformations of the conscious scene and the unconscious scene of *La Bête* is all too symptomatic: it shows the signs of the time.

An entire page of the novel is dedicated to an obsessive list of the cycle of manipulations of the artist’s body image:

Yes, they opened my mouth; they stuck their finger in my ear; they created a weapon with my fingers; they put me on all fours; they hugged me; they simulated cuddling; they put an umbrella in my hands; they lay on top of me; they hugged me; they dressed me; they said a poem in my ear; they told a story while holding my hand; they used their own phone to play ambient music; they put make-



up on me; danced with me; recreated on my body the positions of the Pietà, Jesus Christ, the Monalisa, Superman, the Statue of Liberty; made me kneel; massaged me with arnica oil; fixed the *Fora Temer* sign around my neck; slapped me; cried in front of me; made the audience cry; modeled the “fuck you” sign on my fingers; announced the end of the performance; asked me to stop; talked to me; tried to manipulate me with their voices; dropped me; closed my eyes; tickled me; were reluctant to participate; asked my permission before touching my body; put a turban on me; moved my penis from the left side to the right; made my head touch my feet; left me standing on one leg; covered my penis with my two hands; covered me with a red cloak; kissed me on the cheek; took me in their arms and removed me from the theater; stole the plastic replica; broke the plastic replica; exchanged the replica for a paper origami; put me in the fetal position; sang to me; apologized to me; twisted my knee; made me run; transformed me into a *Bicho*; danced with me; touched my foot (Schwartz, 2023, p. 120).

It turns out that all these transformations, no matter how varied they may seem, were still supported – and mainly protected – by three limiting dimensions: the empirical concreteness of the artist’s body, the institutional device and the fantasy that is connatural to this institutionality. The ideology of the museum guaranteed a certain interpretative security for the artistic device, so that, among the images listed by Wagner, there is not a single one that indicates the real extrapolation of a certain progressive sensibility. As Theodor Adorno (2011, p. 58) wrote in his “Aesthetic Theory”: “Métier sets boundaries against the bad infinity in works”. Therefore, it is from the moment that “the walls [of the museum] no longer separate interior and exterior” (Schwartz, 2023, p. 60) that, paradoxically, the desire for the work will start to become dangerous. Because from then on, the transformations will no longer be just the unilateral projections of a class and an ideology, but will become projective mutations of the monstrous complexity of a country in crisis.

It’s no coincidence that the first transformation described in the novel is an amplified and disastrous repetition of Pedrosa’s opening kick. While the video was being published and the controversy was raging on the internet, Wagner was getting on the São Paulo subway and getting off at Vila Mariana station. From then on, the writer creates his fiction – as they say, based on true events<sup>4</sup>:

I got off the train and walked up the upstairs. My phone was updating with new messages. They were no longer just aggressive. There were thousands more: supportive ones, written by friends and strangers who were online just as I was going through the turnstile to the house where I was staying. I spotted a luxury car parked in my host Olivia’s driveway. I doubted it was one of her friends. At the same time, I felt accompanied on a route that could make any pedestrian hesitate [...]. I passed the car. There were four passengers. “Good evening”. As I took the garage keys, I heard doors opening and closing. I fell to the ground. I looked up, it was a baseball bat. I lost my strength and briefly my senses. One of them grabbed me by the hair. Male voices repeated the same insults that were blasting across the internet. I couldn’t scream, let alone open the gate so that the bitch could rip those men by the neck. I received a punch in the back that aggravated my herniated disk. Then there were eight feet kicking my chest, my belly and my sex. They reconstructed another version of *Bicho* (Schwartz, 2023, p. 24).

4 An essential procedure of the first part of the book consists of a constant return to the trauma in various possible forms; several versions are narrated, without ever revealing which is the true one.



If this narrative is fictional, its real-life counterpart is no less violent. In various comments and in some fake news from the yellow press, the artist is portrayed as if he had been physically lynched. One of the most gruesome headlines reported Wagner's suicide. In the case of this excerpt from the novel, the fictional fantasy of the baseball bat – phallic objects recur in many of the threats – merely updates the expressed fantasy of one of his detractors, who wrote on a social network: “The time has come to change things. If only I could shove an iron rod heated to 850° up the ass of this mother and artist, other perverts would think five times before going public with their nonsense” (Schwartz, 2023, p. 52). This fantasy is surprising for its attention to detail. But in the full text that expresses it, it is curious how the latent – but also patent – sexuality ironically functions as a kind of veil: it is based on one of the most serious social symptoms in Brazil today: the union between politics and religion. So wrote the detractor:

Everyone in our movement will stand up and use their intellect to get our breed out of this dreadful situation. We will work like ants, invisible but active. We will take advantage of this very tense context to spread our ideas and convince people. We will not rest until we have convinced everyone to act. The fall of this republic is inevitable. Everything is rotten and can only be maintained by a miracle. Everything here is fucked up: more unemployed, more migrants, more terrorism, a president falling at the polls. Yet this Christian goodness, this political correctness has brought us to where we are, in moral and financial ruin, in an almost irrecoverable degeneration. The time has come to change things. [...] For many years I have been asking myself how to come out morally clean from this battle against Jews and Muslims, without dirtying my hands with blood – because I want to show myself sinless before Christ, my Savior, when the day comes. It is not possible to fight these two seeds of Satan and all the other perversions and remain clean. It is impossible. I've been looking at the icons of the church. I notice that some angels have swords in their hands – soldiers of Christ, going to war. So a little less charity and scruples would do our people a lot of good, because times are very hard. It's now or never (Schwartz, 2023, p. 52).<sup>5</sup>

It's always surprising when, in a manifesto of a conservative nature, certain passages of revolutionary impetus shine through; because given the current state of affairs, which is radically neoliberal, there would be no way to refute, for example, the Hamletian observation that “everything is rotten and can only be maintained by a miracle”. As the philosopher Vladimir Safatle (2006) has argued on several occasions in the press, it is precisely this inversion that has reconfigured the supposed polarity between left and right: if today conservative action is becoming increasingly revolutionary – at least in terms of direct intervention in the social world and pushing the limits of what has been established –, progressive action, in its turn, is waning, in a weakening of the political force whose intervention is only aimed at preserving previously won rights.

Rodrigo Nunes (2022), in his book *Do transe à vertigem* (*From trance to vertigo*), uses Glauber Rocha's film *Terra em Transe* (1967) as a theoretical model to present a diagnosis – and outline a prognosis – regarding the positions of the Brazilian left in the face of the political abyss.

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<sup>5</sup> In the novel, where the excerpt appears, it's not clear whether the statement is real or fictitious, although soon afterwards Schwartz implies that yes, it is real. But even if it wasn't, a look at the comments on the artist's website is enough to show that such a statement is far from unlikely.



For Nunes, echoing Glauber, political – and aesthetic – action would not consist of nostalgically trying to mimic a certain violent synthesis present today in the impetus of conservative reaction. Rather, the first step would consist of recognizing the abyss, studying it and finally exposing the contradictory complexity of its anatomy:

*Terra em transe* was not intended to answer the questions raised – but it didn't allow people to dodge them either. In fact, the lack of answers was actually part of what was being said. [...] Instead of massaging or placating the spectators' consciences, the idea was to force the left to face up to the collective impasse in which it found itself - to recognize that, as Martins says to Sara at one point: "The abyss is there, open. We're all marching towards it". [...] Compared to the relentless critical dive of *Terra em Transe*, the documentaries that deal with the fall of the PT can't help but seem too comfortable, too willing to spare the left from having to deal with difficult questions (Nunes, 2022, p. 161).

So it's neither a search for lost vigor nor a surrender to nihilistic cynicism. It's about sharpening our ears for the historical opportunities that vibrate in the abysses and erupt in the structures of events. This is where the differences between a noisy work like *Terra em Transe* and a silent one like *La Bête* are dissolved. Both articulate the possibility, through the exposure of the impasse, of recognizing and acting on the transformative paths of the historical desire that runs through and animates each work of art.

There is something about an event that is not reducible to its results. This is because its results are the subject of disputes over what will be inscribed in institutions, practices and ways of life; and disputes can be won or lost, because they are precisely the point where contingency enters history. The event, on the other hand, is *what opens up the possibility of these disputes*, in other words, *what allows previously unthinkable or impossible things to come into play – whether to win or to lose*. [...] "Doing justice" does not imply romanticizing, trying to isolate a pure ideal core amidst the impurity of events, or saying that the dream matters more than what was actually achieved. It simply means recognizing what is irreducible in the event: that a moment like that is not trivial; that a new political moment, for better or worse, is opening up there; that the potential contained in that instant is greater than all its subsequent developments and is not exhausted in any of them (Nunes, 2022, p. 168-169).

It is in this sense that interruption is *La Bête's* primary procedure. If it weren't for the opening of this "point where contingency enters history" – i.e., the Real itself – the history of the work would probably still be subject to administered history today. It would be one more work among many, and like them, potentially invisible. It was the break, therefore, that emancipated it; the forced heteronomy made it autonomous. Perhaps *La Bête* came into being less to be seen than to make see. Through it, contingency was transformed into destiny, so that today the work is no longer just part of an art history: there is a history *through* the work.

According to Luciano Gatti (2009), Walter Benjamin formulates the notion of a virtual history inherent to works of art: "This virtual history is qualified by Benjamin as natural history, a term that gives works a natural life, which includes not only their production, but also the moments of their survival, such as their duration, their effect, their criticism and their translation" (Gatti,



2009, p. 110). In other words, if the work continues beyond its immediate duration, criticism is a moment immanent to it and its history. It is therefore the task of criticism to expose the ways in which this aesthetic virtuality takes place:

The exhibition highlights the works of historical life, allowing their inner history to come to light. [...] Discovering in phenomena their objective interpretation, their virtual belonging to another constellation of phenomena, consists of outlining an image of history concentrated in them. This image is not to be confused with the world of facts: it is a historical constellation of truth, but it is not systematically deduced from individual works. It is the objective interpretation of the works, the reordering, by criticism, of their elements into a new constellation (Gatti, 2009, p. 111).

So it's not as if following and defending the power of *La Bête's* virtual transformations outside its field of autonomy would lead to an annihilation of the aesthetic experience. In fact, it leads to a rejection of any mourning for lost art and the search for an aesthetic experience that will then always take place in new, unexpected places. If a violated work can be one of the critical moments of an emancipated work, it is because it forces the very aesthetic experience to emancipate itself from its administered places. The violated work, in this case, continued in the experience of a country, even though it was no longer there.

But it is.



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