Afterwards: Eleonora Fabião & Jelili Atiku

Institute for Curatorial Practice in Performance (ICPP)
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Sarah Conn: First of all, I just want to thank you for that incredible conversation. Eleonora, I really appreciated the beautiful words you opened us up with; the call for radical change in how we approach matter and form. And Jelili, I was so moved by your provocation about the role of artists, specifically in this moment, and the idea of the role of artists in changing things. As I was listening to both of you speak, I was really struck by the parallels between some of the concepts you were bringing forward. Eleonora, your idea of having a hundred percent aesthetic, a hundred percent social, a hundred percent political, and a hundred percent spiritual. And then Jelili, you talked about the collaboration of all elements, how nothing is an island. This feels to me like the prioritization and inclusion of all key elements in your way of working, which speaks to this idea of inseparability. So I wondered if that might be a good place to start: to talk about that as a choice. What is your thought process behind that choice, how does it manifest in your practice?

Jelili Atiku: The whole world is like a network of elements, a network of energy. Right now, I am in Nigeria. I'm connected with you through Zoom, and that is the nature of things. That is how things work. For example, as an indigenous Yoruba person, you know when one was in the womb of one's mother and the mother keeps eating a lot of things. And most of the things you eat are actually from nature; as you eat and they go into your body, you are in a way connected to nature. You cannot separate from that. And when you are in the world—world meaning physical, the atmosphere, the head, the heart—everything connects us to one another and that's to say an invisible energy moves in the world that connects everybody together. That means, you cannot be an islander. We are all connected within ourselves.

I make reference to that in most of my work. When you look deep, very deep down into the object that I assembled, or the objects that I collaborate with, the spaces that I

work with are also connected to the context that I work in. Everything that I put up as an artist, as an integrator, is connected and cannot be separated. Even the titles. I start with the titles of my work. For example, the word Ẹlàbọ́rù is a sacred philosophy. Ẹlà is a state of enlightenment. Bọ́ is its own action, the ritual. And Rù is your action, a manifestation. When all this comes together, as a human being you have to be active for words to bring out a kind of manifestation that is a connection. This speaks to the connectivity of life, the connectivity of the energy of objects, and the fact that the artist and the audience are inseparable. I hope I make sense.

Eleonora Fabião: That makes lots of sense. It makes sense happen—sense as a happening. Thank you very much, Sarah, for your question. Let's think together. Many things cross my mind. First of all, there is the reference to Denise Ferreira da Silva's text "On Difference without Separability" that I mentioned, her critique of the modern subject which affirms itself via processes of separation. Actually, a fantasy of separability and individualization since those are in fact an impossibility. But this fantasy generated a culture based on individualism and private property, and a planetary state of things based on the idea that there is something called "nature" which is different from us, human beings, and that we should dominate and exploit it. This idea of separability is based on an anthropocentric and racist perspective. In this state of things, many times, difference immediately folds into indifference.

However, if we start perceiving things as bodies—which I think is the beginning of a conversation about how to engage with things in ways that rely less on dynamics of separation—if you start relating in an ethical way with all kinds of bodies, human and other-than-human, if you start not only tolerating or accepting difference but, rather, loving it, learning from it, re-creating yourself through it, you start

dismantling hierarchical relations. Hierarchical relations among humans and between human and other-than-human bodies.

Let's consider the bricks in the HO MOVEMENT, for example. Who is moving whom in this work? Do you think that we were moving the bricks? The bricks were moving us, as much as we were moving them, we were all being moved by each other. There was a dance going on, and the space was the one dancing. This was the thing; this is the performance. Why do we perform? Maybe to create a certain, very flexible… not a frame but a skin… so we can feel, see, make visible these non-hierarchical relations among radically diverse bodies. There's this very subtle performative contour that turns visible difference without separability among things. We perform just to make it completely evident. This profound articulation is basic, but it is somehow blurred in our perceptions. There is a Krenak indigenous man in Brazil who I admire immensely. His name is Ailton Krenak, and he says that this notion of individualism is one of the greatest abstractions of the occidental culture. We engaged in this fantasy with such ferocity for a reason—hopefully a very good one when it started!—, but the consequences now are horrendous. As I see it, there is an immediate need, an urgency to re-create our lives ethically, poetically and politically by dealing with all kinds of matters in terms of "difference without separability".

The planet is collapsing because of an anthropocentric and racist separability. There are ecocides and ethnocides in course. For me, performance is a way to make visible this fantasy of separability and to act in a very direct way to dismantle it. It is a way to generate bodies and to generate relations among bodies that generate new bodies all the time. It's a generative force. It's not only transformative, because transformation is life itself. If you add performative energy to life, then you have a generative force.

Sarah Conn: Thank you. I was thinking as well about the collaborative relationships that both of you are sparking within your work, and the role that structure plays within that facilitation of process. I'm curious about what the role of a relatively formal structure is within the processes that you're building, a structure that facilitates the existence of these kinds of relationships and collaborative processes. It seemed to me that for both of you, there actually was a clear attention and specificity in terms of how you built the process that unfolded over time. Is that fair to say?

Eleonora Fabião: What I have been working with, what helps me gather all these kinds of bodies—not only humans, but all kinds of visible, invisible, heavy, light, aesthetical-political bodies—is a compositional procedure that I developed for myself. It's not a methodology. This word is too heavy and it pre-orders things too much. I call this compositional procedure a "program"—a performative program that involves "corpus and socius, politics and experimentation" as Deleuze and Guattari wrote about the "Body without Organs". So, I program performative programs to de-program habits, mechanics of perception and relation among different agents. I write a verbal description of what I intend to do in the simplest way I can. And then it becomes a kind of mantra, "to do this", "to walk bagged around the city", "to move water from a clay jar to a silver jar until it evaporates completely", "to exchange everything I am wearing and carrying and only go back home when everything is exchanged", "to make a rainbow shine in the city night", etc. And then, collaboratively, we do it. It's a way of desiring and performing desires. It's a compositional procedure – "composition" from the arts, "procedure" from the medical language. But, important to say, the program is already part of the action, it is not previous to it, it is performative language.

Jelili Atiku: For instance, in Ẹlàbọ́rù; the people that I work with are actually people I have developed a relationship

with. We have done a lot of rituals together. I bring them together and say, “This is what I intend to do.” And we start. To me that’s like what Eleonora said about the program. I don’t want to be a colonizer. I try to make most of the people who perform or collaborate with me freer. I let them understand that we have to be connected to the concept, which we are trying to work with. In connecting to the concept, they bring out their own organic action, which is outside to me. This is the Egúngún the sacred presence of the ancestors that is not programmed. It doesn’t have expectations, but rather embodiments. Most of my performance is like an embodiment of the context, which I’m trying to work with. And I let my collaborators understand that it begins to ignite the process; that it will continue to reignite and keep moving into processes and won’t end until we just feel like putting a stop to that—and then it continues through memory.

Sarah Conn: Building upon what you just said, I wonder how the idea of authorship fits in within your work? Is that something that is important to you or do you see it more in terms of dispersion, as you are building these kinds of collaborative relationships?

Jelili Atiku: As an artist who creates work and invites people, I could say the ideas start from me. It is a capitalist way of saying, “I own this.” In the real sense, nobody owns anything in the world. It is the collective existence of humanity. But as the initiator of this idea, we collaborate to build and add flesh to that idea, and the way it keeps evolving in itself is the organic way of doing things. I’m in a session and you initiated the idea; all that contributes to that, just like you asking me a question and I am the respondent. My response, it is my own idea that is coming, you have ignited the reaction in me that is responding to your question. It is like that. But of course, I will say that I create the work; if you want to term it “ownership”; you are

free to do. As a historian, the world wants to put vocabulary into a lot of things, but to me, vocabulary sometimes diminishes a lot of things. When you collaborate, you agree to the work. I use the word embodiment; we all embody the energy through continuous sharing. To me, I need to share it all as an artist.

Eleonora Fabião: I am learning a lot from you, Jelili, from your decolonial thinking. I just want to add something before moving to the issue of authorship. Something about the performative program: it is paradoxical. A performative program is programmed to de-program. It's a program that de-programs habits, relational mechanics, and it is conceived to de-program the colonial state of things. Because, unfortunately, a capitalistic-colonial state of things prevails in Brazil. The so-called neoliberalism, at least in its Brazilian current version, is based on the old colonial heritage, the same nightmare of exploitation, of extractivism, of oppression, of racism but with new "clothes". So, it's very important to think that the program operates by de-programing. It is a performative compositional procedure moved by a decolonial way of desiring things.

I think there is an addiction to a certain understanding of authorship. What I think Jelili is proposing is that there is someone that triggers something, there is an initiative, an initiator. Then, others are invited and there is an energy that is generated and it spreads and involves and moves many different and articulated bodies. As I see it, the work is "the thing". The work, which is much bigger than the so-called "author". I'm interested in the work. I do the work as much as I'm done by the work. And it is always collective, as said earlier, it always involves many bodies of different kinds. The notion of "solo" in performance is part of the individualistic delirium. And the work continues working even when the action per se "ends".

There is also another element that I respect immensely during creative processes: dreams. I dream and I am dreamed by dreams. In the HO MOVEMENT, for example, the design of the final program came from a dream. There are many forces being articulated when a project is being conceived. Everything is very delicate and must be delicately considered. But “the thing” is the work.

André T. Lepecki: Something that maybe could connect both of your works is this notion of enchantment. I was thinking about the importance of touch and being touched, as this kind of sacred act, but also as a healing act, a political act, a decolonial act, but also an act of enchanting. And I’m wondering if both of you have something to say about this notion of enchantment. Thank you.

Eleonora Fabião: This word is very precious, like a pearl. The final sentence written in the HO MOVEMENT’s program is: “enchantment: the ultimate material.” Then, recently, I found this word again while reading [Luiz Antonio] Simas and [Luiz] Rufino. They write that the opposite of life is not death, but disenchantment. Therefore, enchantment is almost a synonym for life. These two authors study what they call the “epistemologies of the macumba”, they are specialists of Afro-Brazilian religions. And, while listening to everything we are discussing now and, also, considering the notion of enchantment, I am thinking about the extreme importance of one specific Orisha. I am thinking about Jelili and the Yoruba culture. I like to work in the streets immensely, the streets are the realm of passage and movement, and the street’s Orisha is Exú. Rufino and Simas tell a story about Exú. They say that Exú was once challenged to choose between two gourds. He would take a stroll in the Ifé market and was challenged to choose between two gourds. I will read from their text: “One contained good, the other contained evil. One was medicine, the other poison. One was body, the other spirit.

One was what is seen, the other what is not seen. One was the word, the other what will never be said. Exú immediately asked for a third gourd. He opened the three gourds and mixed the powder from the first two into the third. He mixed very well. And since this day, medicine can be poison and poison can heal. Good can be evil. The soul can be the body. The visible can be the invisible and what is not seen can be presence. The saying may not say, and the unspoken can make vigorous speeches. Exú became Exú Igbá Ketá, Lord of the Third Gourd. He walks around the market with wavy steps. Occasionally he removes some of the gourd's dust and blows it among women and men. He always challenges us, therefore, to snake—like the coral serpent of three colors that belongs to him—, to serpent the bowels of the world." So, this is Exú's way of dealing with things. This is enchantment.

Jelili Atiku: Thank you so much. Eleonora has given us a very deep philosophy that has to do with enchantment by using that energy called Èṣù. It's about the natural energy that is contained in space in the sense of a magnetic body and that attracts things that I need to experience, things that need to be embodied and expressed. And when you do, it sends out those rays of energy into the atmosphere and everything comes together. When everything is put into a wholeness of things, it calls for different kinds of bodies that are contained in each other. Each becomes an element that has a sole distinct way, and as it comes back, it adds its own content. Things that need to be attracted to one another might be attracted to us. Like in this conversation, you can see how myself and Eleonora organically connect. In the context of this project that we are in, it's an island, a very small island where all come together and attract each other. And that's what we mean by the world itself. Each element has its own distinct way, its own distinct energy. And when all comes together, that's enchantment.

André T. Lepecki: Yes. If that is the case then, and given that the context is the context of curation and that we usually associate curation with institutions—in museums it is associated with the circulation of objects and authors—I'm wondering, for the collective group of curators here, if it's possible to curate the enchantment, or do we desire to do it? And what happens to these kinds of practices that refuse to fall under the idea of the individual object of art and the individual author, if that makes sense? It seems to create a problem I believe for a certain understanding of art in the West.

Jelili Atiku: When you read, you have your own idea. I said earlier that I initiate; if you want to curate, you are initiating the final walk or the final product. In performance, for example, you just have an idea, "I'll bring you two people together." Curation, it's rather a way of organizing things that come together, but sometimes it is difficult to determine what it is actually going to be. This is also true when you are making a performance, you cannot say specifically, "this is what is going to happen." You have an idea, a starting point. Curation isn't creative, even if the final products have been divined in the mind of the curator.

But for us, it's about the freedom of movement and things. You want to follow a natural tendency when you move a body. As I am talking right now, you never expect what I'm going to say. I am free within myself as an organic energy that keeps moving out. Of course, you could say, in the same way as we are trying to colonize every idea, "I am Jelili in space" or "be in this space," or "create." But you cannot determine what we are going to create. If you give some freedom, new forms will come and these forms have their own energy that wants to move in different ways. You could call it curating. We could call it life. We could say it's moving energy that keeps creating. And let me try to say this. I—as a human being, as an artist—I have been telling

a lot of people that the vocabulary you use to describe an action does not matter. The definition you give is not the ultimate content. You are actually describing boundless energy that goes into that. That goes beyond vocabulary.

Eleonora Fabião: I see no problem here. Actually, I see great opportunities. New ways of negotiating "difference with no separability." I see opportunity for new institutionalisms. I see opportunities for new thoughts and actions, for re-creating this super decadent world we are part of, at least in Brazil and in the US, the two countries where I live. I see many opportunities. My impetus is always to think that things that must be done must be really done – and that's it – let's do it. It's a matter of discussing possibilities, negotiating, finding ways together because institutions are groups of people. Groups of people organizing spaces and ways of circulating objective and subjective matters. It all depends on what we imagine and decide to do together.

Constanza Armes Cruz: Everything you're saying is extremely resonant for me. I'm very caught up in thinking through these New York-based and Western institutional structures and problematizing how they operate and how people are treated in these contexts, while also reaching toward this desire for collectivity and inseparability that you're articulating. As a curator and a student, I'm observing many Western arts institutions, curators, and programmers who have this very strong interest in artists working with spiritual practice, specifically Yoruba spiritual practices through Nigerian artists, but also through Candomblé, through Santeria—and how things get lost in translation. I have some cultural knowledge of these practices through my family background, but I'm just trying to understand for myself how to work with art that is using orishas in a way that is respectful of the practice and also translatable. As a curator, wondering how the work can be translatable to

an audience without being fetishistic or appropriative and actually just letting the artists speak and present their work. I am also wondering about these opportunities for negotiation in the context of art institutions about how to present work and about these issues of authorship and the addiction to the individual author. What are some examples of the ways in which you, as artists, have negotiated these kinds of situations? The curator or the institution have an agenda, of course, and it's very hard to break that sort of mentality of the individual and of authorship.

Jelili Atiku: Let me answer that, because you talk about the Yoruba and how that culture should be respected. I am what I practice in life. I am not appropriating it; I am living my life. I am using what I practice as the content of my work. If anybody comes and says, as an artist, they want to study and not practice it, then they appropriate it. That person may not understand what you are doing, and what it is. They may be basing it solely on the aesthetic aspect of it. But because I live in it, I practice it, I am deep in it. I am using the energy of the practice. I'm bringing it to you to feel what you need to feel. The issue is about connecting to the form that I create.

I'm just like what Eleonora did in the installation: when you are carrying the bricks, the audience feels the energy. It is the brick, right? The problem we have is with those institutions that do not understand the context in which the artist is working because they are capitalists. These institutions are only interested in what they want to produce. But as an artist, what I want to produce for you is a way to increase the level of things, to increase your level of consciousness about an idea of contexts. The institutions cannot control the content. What I'm trying to let you understand is that as an artist, bringing an idea or collaborating with material, the material itself has its own distinct quality and energy that must be respected. In the

Venice Biennale, I assembled sacred objects, Iroke Ifa that I brought into the space. One of the curators said they had to use museum-wax to attach the objects on the ground in the space. And I said, “No, you can’t do that because the object is sacred, and the sacred content of it would be destroyed if external material is added to it.” The materials, the essence of the materials is most important. If I am not allowed to use material the way I want to use it, I will cancel the show. Decolonizing the institution is important as many institutions do not understand how spiritual materials need to be used in the way they are.

When an artist appropriates material without understanding its energy, it becomes lifeless. It’s not going to collaborate with you. If I use water in my performance, I’m using water as a sacred element that every person in the world uses and when an audience, in any part of the world, sees the water that I use, it will resonate in their own archival body, in their memory body. The memory itself becomes a material that I use as an artist. If I go to Brazil, I will bring content that each audience will be able to understand. I would not import materials from Nigeria. Because like I said, I would never be, or I try not to be, a colonizer.

Eleonora Fabião: I have no problems with giving birth to ideas. If the name is “author,” and it’s used in terms of transforming the artist into a label or into a product, then I’m sorry—I will escape fast. I can be so fast. But things are different in each situation. This is the work. That’s why it’s performance. Every time you are going to face new situations and you are going to find strategies, ways, modes and velocities to address the circumstances. But I am particularly focused in looking for other economies. I am always trying to escape this capitalistic neurosis, this colonial horror. I do my best to “esquivar” (to dodge) by searching for other logics, other modes of circulating matter and energy. If I will be successful or not it’s another

thing. But I'll do my best. And this is the ethics of the thing. Remember we were talking about learning—the ethics of permanent learning, in an honest and open way. This is also enchantment. It's a matter of being really attentive to all sorts of captures that may happen—and the notions of author and institution can either capture the project by normatizing and stiffening it, or you can find potent ways to address the notions of authorship and institutionalism and make things happen. But, above all, it's a matter of doing things in an honest and open way. And conscious, as Jelili was saying, about these relations and assemblages that only artists can do.

Joshua Lubin-Levy: I want to introduce another word as a way of asking you a question, which is violence. Your works have raised for us different ways of thinking about the work of art as a critique of violence or a resistance to forms of violence. There's so much about generating things, producing, holding space, seeing this kind of life force, this enchantment and being aware that you've both been specifically working against the long legacies of colonial violence, but also our immediate conditions of state violence in various parts of the world. I just wanted to throw that out there and see if you had thoughts about that or have anything we should think about as curators in a world where there's a real curatorial push to present art that engages in some sort of activism which becomes, in a certain respect, our response to violence. There are all sorts of challenges to curating, and maybe one thing we can learn from talking with each other is what it really means to ask art to engage one hundred percent in the political and one hundred percent in the social. How do we do that in a different way or towards new ends?

Jelili Atiku: Since 2009, I have been doing this project In The Red, which is my reaction to the human tendency to be violent. And that has made me too, because I experience

the consequences of violence. The color red is a symbol for the source of energy, power, life, and also a source of destruction. It's all dependent on the way you are looking at it. But sensing is the most important thing. As a curator, you must be able to sense and feel. When you feel an idea—if it is violence, love, care, healing—you must, first of all, start from the feeling. You must feel it because when you don't feel it, you cannot curate or even create. A lot of people pretend that they understand what they are doing. They try to control the artists and try to feel the way they are feeling. But that is not curation. Curating is about sensing how the artist feels about certain things, so that you can too. This sensing can be violence. My body is involved in my performances. I am not acting, you can't give me a script to work with. The performance is me. I am it and it is me. I am feeling it. Does the curator feel what I am feeling? If it is violence, if it is hatred, no matter what the context is, the curator must be able to feel the context itself. That is where the curator should be able to position himself or herself. Because the work of a curator is so majestically positioned. Some curators try to be a colonial master and say, "No, it must be this." And so I tell them, "You are inviting me to participate in your project. Let me be human." In being human it's me, situating myself, sincerely. I have to be sincere to myself, be comfortable with the context I am working with, for my body to fit into it. If you put me into a situation which my body rejects, I won't do it because I don't want to be a capitalist. I am being an artist—sincere to myself, to my material. Most of the time I do that.

Eleonora Fabião: I work with circumstances. Circumstances are the ground material for me. And the circumstances I live in and experience are so violent, so radically violent. Very straightforwardly speaking, there are two very strong forces: there are death forces and there are birth forces moving things. I try to engage with the birth ones. My father

had just passed away and I was writing a text about Lygia Clark's work. The sentence that ends the essay is: "as much as we start dying from the moment we are born, we never stop being born until the moment we die." So, for me, it is crucial to keep the birth energy expanding. This is my way of dealing with violence: a spirit of constant rebirth.

Also, in terms of politics of affects, I am permanently asking: which affects can you circulate and which affects can you block with your performances? This is the point—the only point actually. Then, by dealing with the circumstances you can make things happen, you can articulate bodies, propose modes of sociability. With aesthetical and psychophysical imagination, you can search for generating certain socio-political affects.

Joshua, you mentioned the social and the political aspects of the engagement, but the aesthetical and the spiritual are inseparable. And, as I experience, you need all of them aligned in order to relate with such violent contexts, to relate and to work to reverse such conditions. As I see them, the actions I perform and invite others to perform are not only denouncing violence but actually searching for other logics. Because you can be pretty reactive, right? You can be reactive or you can be propositive. I think that, as a performance artist I'm trained—psychophysically, spiritually and philosophically—to don't respond reactively, but to map, to negotiate and to propose possibilities. Otherwise, I will just continue multiplying the same logics. I work to avoid being trapped by the logics of colonialism, by the logics of violence, by the logics of capitalism. I perform in search of other possibilities. Performance is the art of opening.

Choreographies of the Archipelago: Artists in Conversation, a series of online exchanges between artists who work across a variety of geopolitical and disciplinary contexts, was hosted by the Institute for Curatorial Practice in Performance, December 3-6, 2020. Artist pairings included Yasuko Yokoshi and mayfield brooks, Tanya Lukin Linklater and Okwui Okpokwasili, Arkadi Zaides and Ligia Lewis, as well as Eleonora Fabião and Jelili Atiku. The event was co-curated by Noémie Solomon and Joshua Lubin-Levy, and organized in collaboration with Rosemary Lennox. Generous support for this event has been provided by the Ford Foundation. Immediately following these public presentations, discussions continued through an invite-only forum.

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