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WHAT IS ART? FROM THE PERSPECTIVE OF AN ART CREATOR

Art is work, not only a job or a business, but labour, an intense activity, which demands effort, passion, abnegation: work as a form of love.

There is an expression, that Pirandello uses in one of his theatre plays, *L'Innesto*: “Ci vuol l’arte!”¹ The literal translation is “You need art to do it”. I believe that there is a special craft in order to dispose oneself to the creative work. But what is it? Where and how could one learn it?

Making love and giving birth are not artistic things. They are not a job, but they are actions that require a certain type of work. Maybe art is a metaphor for these two actions, which are so necessary for the continuity of life and to the human existence on the planet Earth. Perhaps, there is not art without human beings. Are there human beings without art? Certainly. For this reason, for me, art is a form of resistance to the whirling ruinous fall towards the eternal immobility. Art plays an essential and redeeming part in the business of living.

Who am I in art? I am a theatre artist and the mother of two children. From point of view of my daily life, I am a parent and a worker; from the point of view of Art, I am an apprentice and a woman giving birth. I continuously plant seeds and I don’t focus too much on the way they will grow. I am not interested in progress or accumulation, when I work to create. I am interested in being precise and in trying to touch that point of the matter (dark...undefined...), from where suddenly a gash of pure light opens itself. I try to do this time and time again. That is why my main focus of interest is in the process of creation and, in particular, in training the way to stay within this process. Sometimes, this working direction presents practical problems, which are the starting point of a long lasting research.

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¹ Luigi Pirandello, “L’Innesto,” *Maschere Nude*, ed. Alessandro D’Amico (Milano: Mondadori, 2007), Atto II, i: “Ci vuol l’arte, ci vuole!”

This is my personal definition of art after my apprenticeship with Anatoli Vassiliev and twenty years dedicated to learning the art of the actor. The moment I was accepted to the oldest Italian theatre academy in Milan, the *Accademia dei Filodrammatici*, I realized quickly that the world of professionalism was just a parallel reality with the one of art. Facing the dramatic conflict between the prosaic reality of the job of the actor and the actual sense of a life dedicated to art, I found peace only in the theatre laboratory work. For me, these years were another type of education to theatre, where I discovered that professionalism in this art is a very different thing than what it was considered in the theatre business. The meeting with Vassiliev represents a pivotal event in my professional life. I realized that my ideal working space is the one dedicated to process of creation and training, rather than the stage. Since then my artistic work moved to the space of the rehearsal room.

During this time, I was working on texts by Anton P. Chekhov, Plato and Pirandello. My last endeavor with Vassiliev was on *L'Innesto* by Pirandello, a text written in 1917 (during World War I), which condenses all its meaning in the theme of the creative love, which is able to overcome the most brutal violence. The concept of love presented in this play could be also considered a metaphor for art, as I profoundly believe, too.

L'innesto was not a big success when it was staged in 1919, mainly because of the concrete impossibility of acting in a naturalistic way, without risking becoming a melodrama: the protagonist Laura, becomes pregnant after being raped and her husband Giorgio finally accepts the child as his own. Pirandello himself had to answer the critics explaining that it would be misleading to consider this play as focused on the personal drama of the protagonist as a stereotypical exaltation of the sense of motherhood, but rather a symbolic and philosophical meaning encompassing the contingency of the dramatic situation. Anatoly Vassiliev's 'ludo' approach to acting is conceived as a development within the tradition coming from the line Stanislavski — Mikhail Chekhov — Marja Knebel (Vassiliev's teacher) and elaborated after working on Platonic dialogues and on Pirandello's dramaturgy. The method of ludic acting is more suitable to reveal the dramatic movement of a play like *L'Innesto*, because it focuses on the play of concepts and ideas rather than psychological situations. 'Ludo' theatre dramaturgy corresponds mainly to the dramatic action of philosophical dialogues and classical tragic texts. Of course, Pirandello's characters also have a strong psychological life. Due to the interplay between the characters' inner drama and the unknown and strict development of the action of the play, Pirandello's texts are conceived as 'mixed structures', i.e. both situational (psychological circum-

stances) and ludic (dialogues of opinions and ideas). In our workshop, while working collectively on *L'Innesto*, I understood that this philosophical approach to acting led us towards the discovery of the meaning of such concepts of love as creation, rigorously following the dramaturgical structure of the play through our 'etude practice', i.e. a technique of structured improvisation where actors are free, but at the same time follow an accurate text analysis.

We even had an open evening to show what we were doing during our working session at the Grotowski Institute in Wrocław in October 2012. I remember that opening session with a slight sense of frustration. It is a completely different experience to show an etude in front of an audience who is external to the work. The atmosphere of intimacy, usually present in the rehearsal room, was gone. I was worried by the possible expectations of this new audience. Until that moment our work was kept away from external eyes and ears. The freedom of being able to make mistakes to which Vassiliev had educated me since the beginning, in order to enter with confidence into the practice, suddenly disappeared. Instead, an unpleasant feeling of fear of not being accurate enough, took place in myself. Probably also the muscular memory of having been on stage in front of an audience many times (I am an actor after all: any change in the environment is perceived immediately by the body and very quickly activates imagination) made me enact all the stereotypical action-reaction mechanisms that I had acquired during my classic training as 'professional' actor. I was basically unable to work as I had during the laboratory session. The air was so different that, instead of playing with it, welcoming the physical change I so strongly perceived, I instinctively built a shell that made me lose the correct and usual way of making improvisations for an etude presentation, as I had been doing every day in the rehearsal room. Vassiliev made a clear point when talking about what happened: it was about my inexperience in working with(in) the process. At that moment, already after three years of work with Vassiliev, I realized that what I thought was my course of specialization after my professional acting diploma, was really the beginning of a long-lasting apprenticeship.

Since then I have been focusing on the role of atmosphere and environment in mutual relation with scenic acting. I am interested in the training of the secret art of the actor linked to the ability of conducting and influencing the surrounding air, i.e. the atmosphere. In order to work with the atmosphere, it is necessary to act in a certain way, which paradoxically is characterized as a form of 'not doing.' I took this as a starting point in Mikhail Chekhov's propositions on the topic of atmosphere, in order to understand it from the point of view of actor's technique. I realized that there is a difference between bringing an atmosphere on

stage and/or creating an environment. About this last concept, the technique is slightly different than the one related to the atmosphere, because it involves a previous work of deeper analysis of the poetic and rhetoric level of the text. For example, once I worked with two actresses based on the second tale of the 9th day of Boccaccio's *Decameron*. The events of the tale took place in a monastery. In our empty rehearsal room, without any prop or costume, the task was to recreate the environment of that precise monastery, through some exercises based on very simple physical actions. We started, first of all, from a solid knowledge of the text. Then I invited the two actresses to work on two opposite images of the monastery. Each image could have as well opposite faces. For our practical aim we agreed that Boccaccio's monastery was a place of ennui and devotion, as well as of longing of desire and eroticism. I asked the actresses to focus on these opposite aspects and to translate them into a concrete simple gesture of their invention that they were performing together at the same time and freely in the empty space: one was enacting devotion and eroticism, the other one the longing of desire and ennui. This improvisation resulted in the building of the 'quality' of that precise monastery in the space of our anonymous rehearsal room. The narration of Boccaccio's tale could find its start in this created environment.

Usually in my work everything starts from a hypothesis, which could even be unrealistic, and I try to put it into action in a radical way. The observation of the consequences and the discipline dictated by extreme honesty towards the following decisions to take, determine my artistic process, which is characterized inevitably as a process of self-transformation.

Rather than filling a certain fixed form, my artistic working process consists in the search for a form, in order to experiment the path for a potential movement to appear. In my view, what I call movement is not an informal thing and it has in itself a structure that makes it flow, even though it is not visible from the beginning, like the bed of a river: the artistic work leads towards its discovery.

Art creates a special dimension different from daily life. I said different, because it is not always distant or in contrast with daily life: the inherent variety of the 'life – art' relation can characterize the system of value of an artist and her working ethics. While being in such dimension it is possible to undertake an authentic journey of knowledge of oneself. Therefore, art is a special type of work which puts in action and trains extraordinary capabilities which are not experienced in daily life.

Artistic work is a dimension which requires a specific effort for the Self, with the Self. It is a special area in which the Self is living, outside routine and one's

own biography; outside a linear idea of life, towards a symbolic one, characterized rather by a vertical tension. There are difficulties and challenges in creating the best conditions for such work, so that the Self can live and act with honesty and precision, without distraction. Most of the time, the greatest working effort consists in finding the ways to overcome such difficulties.

Does this artistic work I am talking have a sense or utility? Probably not. However, artistic work appears unequivocally necessary anytime the will directs the mind towards creation and beauty. As a consequence of such necessity, the 'art – beauty' relation acquires a political connotation, mainly because of its revolutionary significance within human existence. There is a sense of fight in it "as a sort of bloodless guerrilla war,"² a resistance against ugly things, violence and injustice. Therefore, art becomes expression of the concrete need of willing to exist and to do it in a certain way, with decision and awareness, and against the contingent circumstances, as symbolized by the pirandellian *Six Characters'* cry: "We want to live!"³

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² Eugenio Barba, *On directing and Dramaturgy: Burning the House* (London and New York: Routledge, 2010), XVI.

³ Luigi Pirandello, "Sei personaggi in cerca d'autore," *Maschere Nude*, ed. Alessandro D'Amico (Milano: Mondadori, 2007), Inizio: "IL CAPOCOMICO Tutto questo va benissimo! Ma che cosa vogliono loro qua? — IL PADRE Vogliamo vivere, signore! — IL CAPOCOMICO (ironico) Per l'eternità? — IL PADRE No, signore: almeno per un momento, in loro."