

SNDO 3rd year essay 2007-2008
Pablo Fontdevila

"Fire and Brimstone"



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Fire and brimstone

I ask myself: What do you want to say?

This can often make you feel very stupid...

I am only recently overcoming years of fear to consider myself politically apt, or able to defend political ideas. I am not sure of how or why, but by the end of highschool I started already feeling very insecure about my capacity to stand for my views on certain political issues. In the last year, I have been quite busy with finding strategies to allow myself to bring these issues into my artistic work, trying to reconcile the idea of being an artist and the idea of being socially and politically engaged.

Moral and ethical issues treated in art pieces. Can art pieces propose moral ideas? ethical ideas? What's the difference between these two words? In the novel "More than human", Theodore Sturgeon defines Ethos as the set of individual values that one creates for oneself in order to *survive*. I would say that because they are created by individuals, art pieces are created according to an Ethos. Sturgeon defines then Moral as the set of values agreed upon by many individuals, in order to coexist, which means to survive in a collective and as a collective (society). Then, because art pieces need to be shared, and exist in a social space, they are also subordinated to a Moral. In theater, specially, because of its even more collective nature, I think any creative process needs also to construct its own Moral. The Moral of the process, the code by which people involved in it relate to each other and work together.

But this is somewhat intrinsic in the work and work process, and my original question was focused towards the capacity to discuss, communicate or propose sets of values. A question: working according to a specific Moral, does it propose this Moral? It does not necessarily communicate it... How much of our practices as artists are communicated through our work of art? Is that, then, the importance of opening up the creative processes (through the showing of work-in-progress', the use of blogs, the making documentations public, etc)? That somehow the process and its morals are exposed, and can be interrogated as much as the 'piece' itself?

Oscar Wilde: "*There is no such thing as a moral or an immoral book. Books are well written, or badly written. That is all. (...) The moral life of man forms part of the subject matter of the artist, but the morality of art consists in the perfect use of an imperfect medium. (...) No artist has ethical sympathies. An ethical sympathy in an artist is an unpardonable mannerism of style.*"¹ This preface contains many statements that inspire me, but here I would, at least, paraphrase the writing: the morality of art might consist in the perfect use of an imperfect medium, but the work of art cannot escape the morality of its producer and its production process. The *beauty* of a *beautiful* piece of art can still clash with the morals involved in its production process. Especially when these are not the subject matter communicated by the piece. Is that possible? Or does a work of art always communicate the power relations of its production process?

I arrive to a question I consider important about the relation and proportion between means and goals. By means I mean both the 'piece' presented to the audience and all the choices made and actions taken during the creative process; by goals I mean the expected results: the aesthetic experience, the conveying of meaning/message, the raising of questions, the success, the recognition... Maybe even the obtained results, no matter what the expectations were. In my opinion, there has to be a weighting of actions and consequences in the motivation of the artist to produce a work of art. And these are for me, the ethical and moral choices of artists.

One example of this, in my opinion, is Aitana Cordero's work. In more than one occasion I entered in discussion with her about the morality of her choices as an artist, a person that produces art. I often find her work to be very conflictive because, without trying to raise ethical questions, many times seems to be based in exploring situations that clash with a

¹ In the preface to 'The picture of Dorian Gray'

normal sense of survival. I often feel that her work pushes the limits of self- and others preservation, that she doesn't care about *damage* (physical or not), and that she works from very (physically or not) *dangerous* starting points. In a sense, I think I have trouble finding them legitimate because I don't think she's reflecting or trying to bring the audience into reflection about the ethics or morals (the politics) of her work. The reflections seem to come almost as unwanted side effects. Going back a few steps, and to be fair, the conflict I experience as an observer of her work is also due to the fact that her pieces, the aesthetic and experiential results of her work, are usually very attractive, clever, crafted, sophisticated or interesting.

Sometimes I doubt whether some performance concepts are more suitable for *thought experiments* (like Einstein's Gedankenexperimenten²) instead of performance pieces. I wonder how valuable, and how bold, would it be to resign the performance and instead propose another metaphor that communicates the concept. Maybe a text? Of course it cannot offer the same experience. In a sense, it would offer a lot less than a performance. But my question is: is the performance worth when many other important things have to be resigned?

To give an example, I will talk about the piece "3 duos" (later called "Surviving to nr. 3"), extracting the argument from the paper I wrote in february 2007 for the course 'Analysis and criticism', taught by Lot Siebe at the SNDO.

"3 duos" is a very cohesive and compact piece, which seem to be characteristics of *experiential* pieces (I will give that name to performances intended to provoke empathy or some kind of sensual experience in the audience more than to convey intellectual meaning). The clarity and insistence in one constructive principle gives time for the members of the audience to switch into the necessary mode of perception. The redundancy allows us and asks from us to stop trying to understand and start experiencing. In this way, the piece can present –as it was suggested in the feedback session after the general rehearsal– *simply* an unusual way of choreographing duos (partnering) or generating and organizing movement material.

But the movement in itself, choreographed quite thoroughly, is also very specific and doesn't seem to be a random result of the starting proposition. Almost all of it happens on a low level, close to the floor, and has a high level of energy. During each duo one can appreciate the effort of the people manipulating Aitana Cordero's body. But there is something else. There are no caresses, no hugging, no cuddling. No one moves Aitana Cordero's body in a gentle way, no one seems to be concerned with protecting it from the potential damage of the falling, being dragged, being pushed. The overall quality in the way of manipulating seems to be very specifically set: a certain violence permeates the whole choreography. A few (short) softer moments seem just like a subtle contrasting support for the more aggressive movement: a little bit of *suspense*.

Also, the manipulations do not look much like *gestures*. With one or two brief exceptions (for instance, when one of the performers drags Aitana Cordero's body by grabbing it from the crutch), the movement presented seems actually quite abstract. If something, I could say it looks like they are manipulating an object. Not Aitana Cordero, but Aitana Cordero's body, which has already been objectified in a hand programme where the other three performers are presented as dancers and by their names.

So why did the piece seem so violent to me? Mainly because the way Aitana Cordero's body is used becomes *really* dangerous for her. And I think that this operates in two levels. On one hand, it *represents* the violence: we are at a theater, observing a performance where three people handle a fourth body in a dangerous way. We know nothing really bad will happen (or at least should not happen), but read the performance as the representation of something. This could also lead to other threads of thought, especially since the structure triggers a lot of comparisons (and with them, questions about gender, use of strength, etc). But mainly we can see that violence or a violent situation are represented.

On the other hand, the way it is performed seems very *real*, convincing us that the danger is also real. The very unnatural lack of reaction adds to the feeling of a violent situation, where the person who is suffering the manipulations does not react or try to save itself from

² Gedankenexperiment: a logical reasoning about an experiment unfeasible in practicality but whose consequences can be explored by imagination

the situation. Even if this body is objectified and depersonalized, even if it has no character, we are watching a *human body* be thrown and dragged around. No matter how abstract the movement, we don't forget it's a human body. And we still realize that Aitana Cordero's body is being performed by Aitana Cordero. And that, since this (experiential) performance looks more like presentation than representation, she might get hurt. And I would say that the depersonalization in itself, the fact that Aitana Cordero's body is not allowed to be Aitana Cordero, adds also to the feeling of violence.

This feeling provoked in me these questions about the commitment of the performers to the concept of the piece, about the limits one draws when undertaking (in whichever role) the production of art pieces. Under the given conditions, nobody really got to break an arm or a leg of Aitana Cordero's body. But the first performance of the piece was cancelled after a very rough general rehearsal on the same day, where Aitana got an injury in her ribs. This problem made me think especially of the choreographer's motivation to put herself (and others) through this strain. Here comes the question of proportion between means and goals: what makes it worth to put Aitana Cordero's body (or any other) through that risk? And also: what makes it worth to put the audience through that concern?

I think that because the piece was performed in such a convincing way (*it was done for real*), and because of the persistence of one idea, I felt completely empathic. I spent the whole performance very tense, worried, scared, and I started very soon trying to place myself in the role of the performers. In that sense it was extremely affective and effective. The irony of the piece was that by the end of each duo Aitana Cordero looked ok, no major damage, no sweat, no signs of tiredness. In the meantime, each of her partenaires (and probably also of her spectators) got exhausted, sweaty, breathing heavily and looking very tired.

But: why is a discussion about Moral important to me? Nobody seems to like the word. Even my father said in his last e-mail (as a reply to a previous version of this essay): "Moral codes will always be framed by the prevailing Culture and will tend to reinforce it, or at times to impose another one." Why is it important to me? Because I do not think it is important to understand the world/people, but I do think it is unavoidable (and essential) to relate to people/the world.

I ask myself: what are my values? They are the things that I say to myself whenever I need to make a decision on something. What is my Moral? The things I say to myself whenever I need to make decisions inside of a shared space.

I don't believe in amorality. I think of myself as something like a *subjectivist*. I believe that people Do and Choose, and that things happen because of us and are loaded with subjectivity. I try to tell myself: it's okay to be wrong, it's okay to be incoherent. I will build up my ethics throughout my life, it will change with time. I will react differently in different situations.

I like thinking about morals because it implies thinking of collectives and of agreements. I feel these can be thought of as undeniable characteristics of the theater performance, a collective event based on agreements. On some level, the commonly accepted idea that all theater (all art) is political, can be reduced to the fact that art is a collective event: it requires at least producers and observers, no matter by whom or by how many people are those roles performed in reality. And this sharing of a space, physical and intellectual, makes it political. It implies communication and negotiation, and that is why I think it implies also morals.

Then, why the idea of producing art work that presents clear political choices seems so conflictive for so many contemporary artists?

I can imagine fairly easily one answer: strategically, it can be very ineffective. When you're trying to have a political influence in whichever level through your work, to be too patronizing or too clear, to take an almost educational position can be very shocking and uncomfortable for your audience. And this starts sounding like classical rethorics: to convince someone with an argument is better to leave the argument directed but slightly open, so the receiver can almost believe that he or she did the final reasoning. It is their idea now, not yours... But I don't think this is what keeps many artists from proposing specific or defined political ideas.

A friend of mine says she does not avoid the practice but the representation of politics in her work. I think this issue relates more to a certain moral, according to which leaving ideas open through not expressing opinion is the only way to allow space for other people's ideas.

But I constantly feel that this approach leaves out the political responsibility of living in a complex world full of agents of the most diverse (and conflictive) interests. I think that we live in a world where, if you do not do it yourself, someone makes decisions for you. Then, I am interested in finding the capacity to propose specific values, to stand for them, and at the same time to try to allow space for discussion and for others' points of view. I think otherwise we abandon the political space, ironically on the excuse of an ideology of being politically open. But for me it means giving up the only institutionalized space with the legitimacy to fight and regulate the universe of economic interests, which nowadays seems almost allmighty (please excuse the cacophony). I think political or moral growth can only happen in discussion, in contradiction and in the impossibility for definition. I think ambiguity and contradiction, used carefully, can be great political agents and trigger reflection and awareness. I think provoking suspicion is a great tool to activate participation, *to get politics going*. I think creating discussion is necessary to be able to construct morals (and that creating discussion tends to construct morals). And that since we need some kind of moral to share the space of the theater performance, we need to be discussing and to be discussed.

Somewhere around here, morals started becoming politics.
I try to reduce, I try to simplify, and it just keeps multiplying.

When I think of morals, there are a few (loose) issues that come to my mind. Violence seems to be almost central to any moral discussion. I guess it's kind of obvious if you accept the definition of moral in terms of survival. Religion is the next one. Probably because religions usually require the acceptance of a specific moral. Economics follows. I am quite scared of the power of economic interests in our world, and I find morals to be, as a motor for politics, maybe the best possible regulator for them.

violence

Theater and dance, as media, are very prone to provoking empathy. The fact that the work is *performed*, recreated live by people, and specially because people have bodies, makes it very easy for the observer to relate to what happens to the performers in a very intimate way. It seems like is fairly natural to allow or provoke the audience to *enter* into the physical and intellectual *feelings* of the performers. This does not mean that all theater and dance do provoke this empathy, just that it is in the medium's potential.

In a way, violence could be the most prominent subject for a moral discussion in dance. If I go back to the idea of survival as the base for the construction of ethics and morals, the basic layers of the idea are very physical and body related. The extreme opposite of survival would be death (which is pretty physical, right). In between, or somehow all along this path towards death, I would place violence.

And what would it mean for violence to be the subject of dance and theater? Leaving aside the representation of violence, theater (performance) is the space where violence can really occur in front of or even to the spectator. And I think it is important for the artists to question themselves in how they deal with violence within their processes and their art pieces. This is the question I raised earlier on means and goals. Is it necessary, and for what, to exert violence on them or their collaborators or the audience?

I think when the creative process or the performance involves violence, is it likely that the audience will *experience* violence, that it will be (if I can forge a funny transliteration from spanish) *violented*. In a letter to Máximo Gómez in 1884, during their fight for Cuban independence, José Martí wrote: "To give up life constitutes a right only when it is done selflessly". Does this mean that Ethos, o sea, Self preservation, is an obligation? Are we compelled to survive? This ideas question the artists stand of the right to self sacrifice. At the same time, it does seem that some messages can only be conveyed by certain carriers, and that some discussions do have a high cost. Thinking of the (contemporary) artist as the one who's responsibility lies in provoking transformation and change, sometimes is difficult to accept

or submit to ordinary constraints. But I think this is the dialogue I would demand from an artist. And even when this categories might not be very appealing, is the names I have for them at the moment. I keep thinking of means and goals.

Note: note that this paper is getting messed up... too many words seem to have too delicate edges to them... I don't know if I can deal with being specific and clear in the use of every term, it feels like it complicates me too much in the writing... moral – ethic – violence – physical – experiential – politics – religion - which ones should I write with capital letters?

religion

Why talk about religion? Because the title of this essay is "Fire and Brimstone", of course. What is the problem with religion? Why is it so itchy for us atheists?

I can imagine that religions, being somehow total systems (with a pretension to cover all aspects of life and to fit them within one set of criteria), are often exclusive of other value systems. Religions seem to find cohabitation difficult. Even when we agree with some of the values proposed by a religion, we come in conflict if we do not share the totality of the values. I could say religion is not political because there is no place for negotiation and discussion. Religion denies politics (a quote from Salman Rushdie: "Fundamentalism isn't about religion, is about power"). Also, religions have a long history and when we relate to them we often seem to relate to their history. Luckily is not easy to forget atrocities, many of them committed in the name of religions.

I always considered myself an atheist, though with a sort of mystic longing or wish for something magical and unexplainable. Still I have always had a clear rejection for institutionalized religion. Maybe it is a generational mark, or something like that. In the last couple of years, however, I started realizing how my culture and system of values is very influenced by the Jewish-Christian tradition. And because I feel a rejection towards the catholic church, and to certain jewish institutions, I felt conflicted with it. Suddently I felt that maybe the value I give to hard work and effort might be just a cultural imposition, something I 'inherited' from my catholic grand mothers and aunts, or environment... Even when my parents, kind of marxist-atheists, did not try to bring me up into catholic values, I feel totally permeated by them. And the conflict comes because I still feel quite attached to some of them, but I start doubting their true rooting into my ... soul?

I consider myself a hard worker, and I do not hesitate on investing myself totally into the things I do, even if it is tiresome. But at the same time, I keep thinking that the world is an unfair place when people have to destroy their bodies and minds in different jobs to be able to *survive* (good thing that this key word came back to keep some kind of connection with something...), working even more than our standard of 40 hours a week and earning pitiful salaries... and this is talking about people whose jobs do allow them to survive. Bishop Pedro Casaldáliga says to Fidel Castro in a letter: "Fidel, at this point of our lives, and of our peoples paths, you and me can be both atheists and believers at the same time. Atheists of the god of colonialism and imperialism, of the self-worshipping capital and exclusion, hunger and death for majorities, with a world split mortally in two. And believers, on the other hand, of the God of Life and Universal Fraternity, with an only human world, in the equally respected Dignity of all people and all peoples."

I like the idea of not resorting to violence, and of turning the other cheek... but many times I just feel like slapping back really hard. Sometimes I feel violence is just natural, and can even be beautiful. Sometimes I wonder if violence is really necessary for some enterprises and fights, and if it is justified by the violence exerted by some. And on top of that, if violence justifies the violence of others, how inefficient it can be in strategical terms...

money

I will take the thrust of this last section, which already started overlapping back and forth with the issues of violence and economics.

More than a year ago, when I was working on my solo "White is the color of death", I started writing a document that served me as a tool for reflection about my creative process and about the issues adressed by this process. At some point I sent this document to many people. Some of them reacted. My father wrote to me: "The tragedy of the contemporary world is that it found no alternative to the hegemony of Capitalistic Imperialism. The failure of real

Socialism in the USSR is the failure of the proposal a German genius offered to transcend Capitalism, since it rooted in a poor country like Russia. As Isaac Deutscher says, Stalinism was the Socialism of illiterates. Progressive, today, is to fight for a society of equals, on a planetary scale."

As I said before, when talking about amorality, in our world the economic powers and interests seem to be undefeatable. When you think of it is overwhelming. And I believe that still the space of politics and the political space are the only tools with the power to regulate a universe that has of course its own morals: the morals of money and profit. In our nation-state world still the space of politics has the legitimacy to impose conditions on the machinery of economic power. At least for now, I see in politics the only space that can set limits to multinational companies and guarantee certain equalities: of opportunities, of basic comfort, of health, of a space for creativity. And I think that the essential drive behind Politics are Morals. The construction of values agreed upon by many individuals, in order to coexist, which means to survive in a collective and as a collective.

art

Is there a moral to art? Should there be one?

Outdated political problems, like the validity or actuality of ideas like communism and socialism. What are the really contemporary political issues? That is obviously different in different parts of the world (this world of ours, always out of synch...). Some themes seem more 'hip' than others. But I feel that this sort of *progress* of problematics, this sort of being updated on what are the *real* actual problems, also tends to mask other (older) problematics. Problematics that are certainly still valid and in force in disempowered places of the world. Which makes me reflect about the construction of narratives, historical and political narratives, and again to points of view. But I leave that for the next piece of writing, and the next piece of dance.

What can a political theatre deal with? Which audiences can it address? What we can perceive from a performance, is it subjected to identification? Then what are the politics of reading a performance if they only/always relate to ourselves, to how we see ourselves, to the dictations of narcissism? Do we feel at stake, or that our values are at stake, when watching a performance?

Identity seems to be a preferred issue for political theatre. Since performing involves somehow assuming other identities, it seems natural that all political issues related to identity (gender, race, nationality and the politics of migration, etc) can be easily addressed by theatre. Identity also seems important because of it being defined socially, so any addressing of identity addresses social codes, agreements, conflicts. And theater is intrinsically social, and based in codes and collective agreements.

Also the politics of culture and the politics of the cultural markets seem to be accessible for discussion through performance. This includes the implications of and the ideologies behind multiculturalism or interculturalism, cultural funding and government subsidies, official programming, etc.

On the other hand, I would like to think that art can be involved not only with the politics of culture, but can also affect the culture of politics. Art can propose new models for participation, for discussion, for approaching social problems. Theater, as a specially social event, is a space for reformulating the shared space of the social.

This is what Guillermo Gómez-Peña addresses in his book "Dangerous border crossers". Drawing from some of his propositions, I try to reflect on why theater can be political:

-As a medium, theater goes away from the mainstream (which doesn't mean that the medium cannot be soaked with mainstream ideologies). Because it cannot catch up with the times of television or internet, it proposes no matter what a different use and perception of time, and specially of the shared time.

-The frame of theater allows for a certain multiplicity or multilayering that is not perceivable in the mass media, supporting then the drift away from simplistic binary oppositions (us/them). In Gómez-Peña's words, "The new conceptual models for understanding and

explaining our times must be fluid, open-ended and multidimensional.”³ And this seems to come naturally to the medium of theater (or to art in general?). Theater favours, as Gómez-Peña proposes, the practice of *intelligent skepticism*.

-Theater is a space to share, to occupy in collectivity. The performance situation generates the space for daily discussion on politics and culture. And the creative processes are dialogic, discussion being intrinsic to them. Theater seems also like a proper place to “sit at the table with your true enemies”, just as the mexican performance artist proposes. Because theater (art) is so much about exposure, and because it happens in a social space, it automatically fights self-marginality.

Re-reading my writings for the process of “White is the color of death”, I found interesting the ideas that relate to contradiction and ambiguity. It is about allowing oneself to be contradictory and ambiguous, not only because of its effect on communication with other people, but also as a strategy to keep oneself active and support oneself. In a way, not demanding absolute coherence from oneself helps prevent paralyzation or stiffness. There is already enough to paralyze us, the world is already quite a twisted place, and difficult to change too.

That is why I keep trying to find strategies that allow myself as an artist to stand for ideas without knowing all the right reasons, without having all the good arguments, without being able to give answers. After all, one does not need to have solutions to be able to recognize problems.

At the moment I am quite convinced of the political beauty of contradiction and ambiguity. Maybe it only applies to art, but I’m an artist anyway. Where does this beauty come from? From the fact that it demands reaction. Unclarity, I’m not sure how obvious or subtle, triggers discussion: there is normally a reaction, a demand for clarity or a complaint, an argument against or for something... In any case, there is *activity*.

Contradiction and ambiguity can be powerful tools for the activist. More than explanation, even when there is a clear idea of what is the artist/activist’s stand on the discussed subject. There is political beauty in the idea of provoking discussion and reflection, rather than educating.

There is political beauty when, in any case, there is movement.

³ “Activist commandements of the new millenium”, in “Dangerous border-crossers”

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informal references and acknowledgements:

the writing of this essay was also informed by the correspondence with my father, Pablo Antonio Fontdevila, and by the correspondence with friends and colleagues Diego Gil and Nora Heilmann. I also drew from past writings of mine such as the paper 'Aitana Cordero – 3 duos', from the course Analysis and Criticism (SNDO 2, 2006-2007 - prof. Lot Siebe) and the paper 'Introduction and research elements in "White is the color of death" '.