

Marlene Monteiro Freitas:
Choreographing Openness
Alexandra Balona

“Contradictory thoughts do not try to eliminate one another, but continue side by side, and often combine to form condensation-products, as though no contradiction existed.”

– *The Interpretation of dreams*,
Sigmund Freud

Guintche (2010) is a concert, a drawing, a dance, a circus show, a wax figure.

Of Ivory and Flesh – Statues Also Suffer (2014) is a dinner, a reality show and a ballroom that gathers the petrified, the statues, the musicians and the dancers, the humans, the animals and the hybrids, visible and imaginary, real or phantasmatic.

To approach Marlene Monteiro Freitas' choreographic worlds is to relate to theatrical scenes that are always open and never self-enclosed, that (dis)organize themselves through uncanny and contradictory dynamics. Where the relations between the visible and the invisible, cause and effect, perceiving and thinking—and from there, writing—can no longer be taken for granted as unified discourses, but as unstable, oneiric ensembles.

In fact, the work of this Cape Verdean-born dancer and choreographer can hardly be translated into words, as it is not contained within the realm of language. Hers is an artistic search for intensity, strength and atemporal “pathos”, rather

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than transmission of a meaning or intellectual concept. But this “pathos”, as a condensed force or emotional condition engrained through time in images and gestures, is disrupted through strategies of metamorphosis and the contradictory simultaneity of kaleidoscopic montages of images, figures, music, and bodily movement.

In Freitas’ works, a deeply embodied, insular heritage of music, rhythm, and dance practices is combined with an array of eclectic references from visual art, cinema, music, and theory. But they also draw on the aesthetic licentiousness, irony and “becoming other” of the utopian ritual of Carnival – “the festival of joyful otherness” (Coderch and Stoichita, 1999: 15), and references derived from Freitas’ archive of everyday life.

To experience Freitas’ work is to enter an open and unconfined space, undefined and uncertain, where familiarity and strangeness co-exist. As with Carnival, one witnesses not the destruction of opposites but their structuring. By the same token, Freitas seems more attracted to the tension between these polarities, than to emphasizing their opposition.

She usually begins each work with extensive research, an on-going atlas of references that informs her movement research, together with a musical pre-selection. Music is a crucial tool as it allows the choreographer and the performers to access specific working areas, intentions and imaginaries. It is precisely from Freitas’ relationship to music and composition that relevant choreographic ideas arise.

***Guintche*, or the incoherence of all matter**

“Guintche” can take several forms. However, notes Freitas, between all these forms there is no resemblance, only the same intensity, the same nature (Freitas, 2013). Indeed, “guintche” was a jazz concert, which produced a particular affectation, registered in a drawing. “Guintche” is also a word in Cape Verdean creole with various meanings: a bird, a prostitute, or it can be used to refer to someone who moves from one event to another without logical or coherent choices.

Guintche, the dance, is in fact the embodiment of incoherent oppositions and immeasurable excess. Propelled by an exultant force, Freitas embodies the potentiality of simultaneous contradictions, the fury and strangeness that challenges not only the duration of her movement, but also a rational comprehension of *Guintche*'s figure.

Her body is divided in two: the lower limbs rooted in the ground follow the repetitive mechanics of her hip movement, with a rhythm reminiscent of Cape Verdean dances. The upper limbs and face express a kaleidoscopic array of modes and states that recall bird-like gestures, animalistic and clownish postures, bringing together fear and parody, irony and indifference, cannibalism and eroticism. Freitas’ expression is focused in her eyes, the proper locus of the subject’s identification, and mouth, one of the most symbolic body openings. Thus, these polymorphic distortions aim at disorganizing the stability of a (more-than-human) self.

“This wax figure”, Freitas reflects, “melts, solidifies, hides, changes form (...) and the sequence of transformations produces distinct images: circus, cannibalism, ectoplasm, rituals, gymnastics, puppets” (Freitas, 2013). However, *Guintche* always retains its matter due to its imponderability and counter-intuitive structure.

Circus music with drums sets the tone, and the piece unfolds in two parts, with Freitas dwelling in that indomitable split movement before, at a slower pace, she starts wandering through the space in what could be recognized as circus entertainment scenes. With clumsiness, mechanical puppet movements and virtuosic gymnastics, Freitas embodies transitional and contrasting figures that recall desolation and hopefulness, comedy and sadness, indifference and fragility.

An atlas of eclectic references have informed *Guintche*: Goya's drawings, Franz Xaver Messerschmidt's sculptures *The Character Heads*, the film *Les maîtres fous* by Jean Rouch, and the “becoming other” of Carnival, among others. *Statues also die*, a 1953 documentary by Chris Marker and Alain Renais that traces not only the uprooting of African art by the colonial power but also its annihilation, is another reference. The transformation of art from living symbols within a culture, to objects deprived of life by the Western context of museology and consumption, points ahead to *Of Ivory and Flesh – Statues Also Suffer*. Subjected to colonial power, the figure of the black slave progressively acquired other roles, as

Marker and Renais point out: “the black puppet” for entertainment, and in modern Western context, “the black sportsman” or the “black boxer”. In the bareness of *Guintche*'s scenography, one notices a punching bag hanging from the ceiling. A remark, not particularly to Cape Verde's heritage as a former Portuguese colony (as Freitas' work does not inscribe itself in a post-colonial critical discourse), but perhaps to symbolize strength and struggle, which nevertheless returns the gaze to the spectator.

Of ivory and flesh, or the metamorphic potentiality of art

Masks and statues populate Freitas' *Of Ivory and Flesh – Statues Also Suffer*, in a delirious ballroom of transitional figures: half-petrified, half-humans, half-animals. A fictional space that does not follow, nor is it limited by, any rule or convention, not even that of life and death. The materiality of objects and images becomes animated through choreography, disrupting the dialectic of animated subject and unanimated object. Expression and transformation are once more focused in the performers' mouths and eyes, with grimaces that evoke strangeness, rigidity and the animalistic.

The dark space illuminated by strobe lights, and the shiny blue costumes, contrast with the ivory of the performers' painted faces. One should not expect any direct reference or coherent message, but again, a montage of oppositions in continuous metamorphic processes. Music plays

a key role in this choreographic montage, starting with Omar Souleyman's techno-dabke, interrupted with moments of silence, buzzers and live cymbals. Arcade Fire's "My body is a cage" underlines the realm of the petrified, Monteverdi disrupts the ensemble, and Nina Simone's "Feelings" appears, unexpectedly, as an encore. Strangeness, impurity and intensity, the key words of Freitas' work, are confirmed once more.

In the Pygmalion myth of Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, the sculptor falls in love with his own *oeuvre*, a female ivory statue, which the Gods decide to endow with life. The statue has no real referent; it is not a mimetic object but the source of Pygmalion's own imagination and artistic mastery. According to art historian Victor Stoichita, Pygmalion's myth can be read as "a parable about the origins of simulacrum in the transgression of art representation, suspension of mimesis and in the deviations of desire" (Stoichita, 2011: 12).

This simulacrum, as an embodied image, a phantasm in-between reality and imagination, touches upon the magical capacity of the aesthetic and artistic work. In the original myth, the transitional process from ivory into flesh had an intermediary stage, in which wax was the symbolic material – the precise matter that granted *Guintche* its metamorphic potentiality.

In Marlene Monteiro Freitas' work, choreography is an artistic process that opens space for the unpredictable and the contradictory to be staged as if there were no contradictions at all. Her

work has uncontrollable life and force, an illusionist quality that challenges the boundaries between the rational and irrational, conscious and unconscious, and an audaciousness that follows its own singular path.