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Expressive Malfunctions

Watch the next two sentences: An artist asks a writer to write a text in response to the artist's work, for a catalogue accompanying an exhibition the artist will soon present in a gallery. The writer agrees. These are the actions that are necessary to produce a text in the context you are reading here. The text is the product of a structure and a relationship, which you do not see, and which does not need to be acknowledged in the text, because we all know what we are doing in this situation: the catalogue text 'functions', it is 'doing its job'. Writing and reading a catalogue text about an artist is a normal thing to do in contemporary art, so much so that we do not think about the synthetic structure, which brings it into existence. But whilst we may not think of these conditions whilst we read this, they are what permits this exchange (looking at art, writing, reading) to exist.

João Onofre's videos examine the artificial structures by which culture presents itself as if it were natural. Of course when culture 'works', when it 'functions' or 'does its job', we are not interested in the techniques, conventions and technologies that are involved in producing it, we are only interested in the fact that it produces the effects we respond to. Yet our subjective response is always to an object that is a synthetic construction, made up of various elements: Not just the purely technical factors that produce a work, but also the traditions and conventions of a genre, the formal, cultural and social histories that make a cultural work alive and allow it to communicate meaning to us.

Onofre is interested in how such conventions and structures, that allow us to express and receive meaning, can be represented. In *Casting* (2000), the artist gathered commercial models and asked them to interpret a line from Roberto Rossellini's neo-realist masterpiece *Stromboli*. Repeatedly, they come to the foreground and declare "che io abbia la forza, la convinzione e il coraggio" ["that I would have the strength, the conviction and the courage"]. In *Stromboli*, this line is the despairing last cry of the female protagonist, played by Ingrid Bergman, as she struggles to escape the confines of her hopeless situation on the eponymous volcanic island. The dimension of existential suffering that Bergman transmits through her plea evaporates when uttered by these casual, good-looking young men and women. As hard as they try,

they communicate as much humanist torment as a television commercial for GAP clothes.

Yet Bergman's extreme, convincing performance is just as artificial as the unconvincing utterances of the subjects of *Casting*. But whilst the humanist morality of Stromboli, Rossellini's unsentimental camera and Bergman's acting are all mobilised to 'communicate' themselves to the viewer, Onofre's self-reflexive structure examines any structure's capacity as a vehicle of meaning. The models may declare a desire for fortitude, but for what? For their success in the casting? For their careers as models? By scrutinising the form of the casting session, Onofre forces the technology of cinema (camera, studio, actor, script) to observe the part of its production it normally hides from its audience. But in addition, Onofre allows political aspects of the situation to infect the proceedings. Forced into a never-ending loop, the power politics of a casting session are short-circuited. Professional models and actors, habituated to presenting themselves in competition with each other (who will get the job?), are here forced to endlessly repeat their audition, without the reward of success or disappointment of rejection. A strange solidarity begins to infect the group, smiles, fits of giggles surface, as the futility of the action begins to erode the blank professionalism of these cool attractive bodies.

Cultural forms appear self-evident for as long as the conditions of their existence are not scrutinised. In *Pas d'action* (2002) Onofre develops the contradiction between artistic convention and unmediated expression by forcing to a halt a form that traditionally aspires to fluid, expressive lyricism. Demonstrating their refined, hard-trained talent, a group of Ballet dancers rise simultaneously on demi-pointe. It is a movement that suggests motion and release, expressive articulation. Instead, nothing happens – *Pas d'action*. The dancers hold the position. Some start to struggle, and lose the pose. A position that is usually a unit in a greater artistic vocabulary is immobilised and now becomes simply a trial of endurance; what appears initially light and effortless is changed by Onofre's intervention into a physically strenuous act. One by one the dancers become exhausted and drop to a standing position. Again we are confronted with a strange sense of futility, and a curious intimation of violence, as the usual contract between performer and director is undermined.

This 'contract' that usually exists between artist and audience in the creation and reception of a work is what makes a cultural form function. Equally, performers and directors settle an unspoken agreement to produce, in collaboration, an object that

exists both between them and beyond them. With *Instrumental Version* (2001) Onofre subjects the notion of technology in artistic creation to a set of inversions and mirror-doubles with absurd and troubling results. Hiring a professional choral ensemble, Onofre commissioned a choral rendition of Kraftwerk's famous electronic anthem *The Robots*, from their 1978 album *Man Machine*. Programmed synthesisers are translated into human voices, as the singers mimic the sounds of particular electronic instruments; yet the most human element of this ode to post-humanity, the vocal lyrics that contain the refrain "We are the robots", is perversely absent from the choral version. Onofre's self-disrupting structure provokes the realisation that choral performers are so many 'automatons' performing specific tasks in a greater 'machinery'. If in Kraftwerk's original synthetic voices declare their status as conscious subjects through declaration ("We are the robots"), in *Instrumental Version* human beings are converted into passive operators of simple units of sound, rather than transcending this function to communicate anything beyond this. Onofre's insight is to recognise that in a choral ensemble, between a group of actors, in the Ballet troupe, the individual is 'already' mediated by broader structures, cultural, social and political.

Onofre's work follows a tradition of conceptualist practice where the apparent self-evidence of what we assume to be an artwork is scrutinised, and internalised by the artwork itself. But in operating in the space where social organisation, cultural norms and artistic technologies combine, Onofre allows the reflexive artwork to operate on the predetermined systems that underpin the wider horizons of social and cultural life. Critically, such systems are not innocent of questions of power, hierarchy and inequality. The situations Onofre presents become micro-cosms of such tensions, as performers are placed in a self-critical reflection in which the normal fulfilment of their conventional roles is prohibited. If Onofre's work plays with cultural clichés that represent the paragon of human self-expression, whilst undermining and short-circuiting them, it does so to make us sensitive to how communication is dependent on structures that usually remain hidden, yet determine its possibility. Onofre suggests that whilst the individual is framed by social forms and cultural conventions, and whilst communication is always mediated, never pure or 'authentic', it is always possible to reclaim the potential of escaping from their determining order. There is, for Onofre, always the possibility of reclaiming a critical distance, and it is paradoxically in the space opened in that reclamation that the potential of

communication emerges.

Producing situations in which self-awareness and reflexivity become a priority, Onofre's videos reminds us that culture 'functions' only when we participate freely in it, and it is only then that communication and self-expression can occur. If that participation is forced, or becomes burdened with the weight of dead cultural habit, that potential disappears. Through this self-aware feedback Onofre's videos paradoxically reassert the possibility of communication and expression, as long as we remain aware of the structures, habits and influences that channel it, enable it or repress it. Now read the first three sentences of this text again.