

VN =  $\frac{4}{\sqrt{39.8}}$  Bare Life and postpartum in performance art

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"In performance there is a much greater accentuation of the present moment, of the moment of action (what happens in "real time"). This creates the characteristic of *rite*, with the audience no longer just a spectator, but in a kind of communion". (COHEN, 2011, p.97)

This article is comprised of subheadings, which start with the deconstruction of the formula in the title of the performance through the paragraph **The construction of the title**, where the letters and numbers that make up the formula and its theoretical foundation are analysed. In the following paragraph, **Art as inspiration**, the author describes works by other artists and the ponderings that these works provoked. In the paragraph **The Performance**, the performance itself is described including the **Conduct during the performance**, which are the rules established prior to the performance, and the **Permanence in the P.O.T.S. 2013** describing the experience itself, the audience and the initial idea in contrast to the actual event.

The author and performer, recently initiated into the world of motherhood, experiencing her death as a woman and her birth as a mother-woman, realizes that the postpartum period – the period from the baby's birth until her or his first birthday – would be a precious moment of transformation, pondering and self-knowledge. Thus, she proposed to face - through art - the hardships of solitude, isolation, technocracy, patriarchalism by which she had discovered herself being victimized. So she thought of a performance in which she could exhibit her inquiries and the moment in which she was living. She conceived this performance where the artist-woman, mother-woman, pondering-woman, puerperal-woman relationships were present and explicit; thus fulfilling the condition of Bare Life but not naked because she becomes conscious and active in her convictions.

## The construction of the title

The term Bare Life (BL) is used by the Italian philosopher Giorgio Agamben (2002) with the intention of showing the state of political, economical and social exclusion to which some social groups are submitted. Bare Life is understood as life that can be eliminated without any burden such as refugees, homeless, homosexuals, prostitutes, women and children.

- a) The Performers and their definitions.
- b) For the formula, we transformed the performers' genders and characteristics in numerical values in the table below:

Name	Gender	Characteristic	Age
Paula	Female	mother	39 years and 2 months
Lia	Female	child	6 months
Total	2 females	1 mother 1 child	39.8

c)  $BL = 39.8$

39.8 is the total of the sum of the performers' ages. This amount is raised to the fourth power in order to explain the condition of nudity of their lives, considering that you have 2 females being 1 mother and 1 child which totals the state of exclusion and fragility to the 4th power.

d) Title:  $BL = \sqrt[4]{39.8}$

This way, the formula above is obtained as a performance proposal that addresses the bare life and the postpartum period.

## ART AS INSPIRATION

In order to deepen this performance, the author referred to works of art that could portray this postpartum period. At first, the Renaissance paintings came to mind. When observed closely, the author noticed that most of them portrayed babies and their mothers in a serene way, which is somewhat distant from what the author was experiencing. Postpartum requires more than wholeness; it requires patience, resignation, acceptance of sleepless nights, of lack of time for grooming, of the appearance of dark circles under eyes and a continuum of unkempt hair.

A search for sculptures was then carried out. She found no reference to women and children that could attribute postpartum characteristics to sand sculptures. However, she found sculptures in grass and ice, as shown below in Figures 1 and 2:



Figure 1: Mathilde Roussel. *Lives of grass 1*, 2010.

Soil, grass seeds, recycled metal, fabric.

Figure 2: Events Department. *Sculpture in ice*.

These two works demonstrate the simple performance of nature elements, and require a trained eye, an eye that is able to contemplate them for the sublime sensations to which they can send the observers.

For the Bare Life performance, these sculptures propose the idea that our bodies, being in a dignifying environment, can transcend the daily difficulties of the postpartum period, such as adapting to newness, fatigue, routine, social expectations to reach a new level of awareness of the world coming from the relationship with a baby who is completely dependent on affection, food and basic care. These sculptures are as sensitive as the birthing process of the baby and the mother-woman.

After finding the grass sculptures (Fig. 1) and ice (Fig. 2) the author searched for references in the cave drawings of Serra da Capivara, in Piauí, Brazil (dated as from 8 thousand years BC). She contemplated these figures for long periods, paying special attention to the figure of the human birth (Fig. 3). It was as if the mind wandered through a space between reality and fiction, and one could witness what is most beautiful in the world. Through these cave drawings there was the absolute certainty that women need to accept and embody themselves as an intelligent, sensitive and strong human beings, who must return to their place of expert in the mysteries of the world without letting themselves being seduced by cheap offers that lead to childishness and distraction. The cave figures prove, through their records, that each one has their place and this must be respected, for there is no depreciation in accepting oneself as one is.



Figure 3: *Cave painting*. Serra da Capivara, Piaui, Brazil

## **THE PERFORMANCE**

During the exhibition titled P.O.T.S. (Place, Occupation, Time, Space) 2013, held in October at the Institute of Arts of UNESP, Sao Paulo, a rectangular wooden module was installed measuring 2m x 1.20m x 30cm, covered by a white padded quilt, double-bed-sized, with details in lace, to receive the performers.

The author and her daughter remained on this module for three consecutive hours in three different days of the exhibition, totalling a performance time of nine hours. Their transport to and from the exhibition was done by public transport, wearing regular every-day clothes. When they arrived in their dignified area they changed into the clothes chosen for the performance: Paula wore a red top and long white pants and Lia wore red onesie. Before leaving the module, they changed out of their performance clothes, which were left folded over the bed.

The colour of the clothes has meaning: the child wears red, a colour the author related to action, life, movement, the volcanic eruption of natural childbirth through which ba-

bies are born. The mother wears white pants and a red top. In this case, the white of the pants means that the amount of red in the mother is limited since she has been somehow shaped to the environment in which she lives, to the society in of which she is part. On the other hand, one can also understand that white is a neutral colour, the colour of peace, the colour that does not take sides, the colour that accepts what is offered.

On the bed there was only a small mirror, a white jacket for Paula and a white beanie for Lia, in case of cold weather or wind.

The purpose of this performance was to sacralise and value the experience of motherhood, especially during the postpartum period, proposing that it be lived as an invitation to reflection, to the recognition of the fragility of life, to the strengthening of the affective ties between our species, beyond genders, social classes and ethnicities. The idea arose from the perception that the onset of motherhood – perhaps because of the extreme sensitivity felt by the mother, since she transforms from woman to mother-woman; the baby's total dependence on her: breastfeeding, grooming, comfort, stimulation and constant presence of the mother, both immersed in the absence of social comfort and thus ignored in their needs – is lived at home almost in isolation, which can also be understood as a moment when one realises how vulnerable women and children are, being easy prey for a patriarchal, chauvinist and technocratic society.

A reflection on the patriarchal, chauvinist and technocratic aspects of our society:

- Discrimination against women in their work environment, because if she does not have children yet, she will eventually and this will cause a decrease in production since she will be absent for a few months. Upon her return from maternity leave, she still has job stability and cannot be dismissed. She will have to prevent her children from becoming sick; if this happens, her absence from work to take care of the children is not welcome. Women who already have children know that it becomes easier to find jobs when the children are grown up, as they do not require so much dedication.
- Brazil has a rate of 54% of C-sections and most of them are elective, that is, per-

formed by appointment, because it is understood technocratically that our bodies are no longer able to give birth wherever and however you want. Besides, doctors do not want to spend time with a normal birth that can last twelve, twenty-four or forty-eight hours, considering that a C-section can be done in about forty-five minutes in supposedly aseptic conditions can earn the doctor and the hospital a lot more money.

- Maternity leave varies from four to six months, in contrast with the World Health Organisation recommendation that the baby should be exclusively breastfed for the first six months.

- The professional field for women in the postpartum period is limited to the home (not place) where, in addition to caring for the children, it is also imposed on them the care for the house, including washing, ironing, cooking, cleaning (repetitive activities that do not add any process of Intellectual growth, which is highly valued in our display society).

- Culturally, it is passed on to women that they should manage to also care for their partners (after all, fathers go out to work every day and mothers JUST stay at home with the baby). And she, as a servant-woman, should only take care of her surroundings and of the baby, who is – while still an infant – an entertainment server and equally disposable.

- There is an economic valuation of infants, which prompts women to distractions with superficial (and overvalued) care such as the baby's room and layette. This overvaluation leads women to keep up with ideal and imaginary questions about motherhood, and prevents them from delving into the real issues of motherhood and the birth of the mother-woman.

- It is unsavoury to go against the saying: motherhood is a blessing. That is, the hardships of marriage after the birth of a baby, the caring for the child, the wish to carry out personal projects, to complain about being tired or not having visitors is understood as inappropriate comments or excessive complaints. After all, maternity should be accepted without any objection, which is an excessive burden, completely unnecessary

because there is no learning without reflection and criticism

- There are very few places that are specialised in welcoming and comforting postpartum women, and few books about it. The literature available is about postpartum depression, which is different to questioning women's transition and new role as a pondering-professional-wife-mother-woman.

- Motherhood and childhood are fetishized. This way, there is nothing more interesting than institutionalizing this fetish by transferring the care for children to nurseries, family day care and child care centres and preschools, keeping mothers and children as hostages of the latest tendencies of fashion, infantilism and superficiality.

The mother-woman is left to reconcile with her choices of her role as mother, wife, woman and professional with very little external support. However, art can present a possibility of empowerment by explaining the hardships of Bare Life, the emergence of a New Life, full of life and ponderings through performance, as we will see later.

### **CONDUCT DURING THE PERFORMANCE**

The performance lasted for three days, on Tuesday evenings from 6:30 to 9:30pm, Wednesday afternoons from 2:00 to 5:00pm, and Friday afternoons from 3:00 to 6:00pm. During each performance, the following rules were obeyed:

Mother and Baby	Mother and Baby	Baby	Visitors
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Must stay within the designated area for the duration of the performance  Must not accept food from visitors	Free movement within designated area  Free interaction with visitors	Nappy changes allowed (did not occur)  Allowed to feed on demand	Prohibited from entering designated area
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### **THE STAY AT P.O.T.S. 2013**

Here are some comments and dialogues between the performers and the audience:

a) - No, I can't get you out of there.

And the baby kept reaching for a visitor.

- No, I can't pick you up.

And the visitor held the baby's hand.

And the baby and visitor kept holding hands. One on the bed, the other outside the designated area. Until the baby became interested with something else and let go of the visitor's hand.

b) - Wow, how old is she? She's so smart!

c) - Oh! What a beautiful smile!

d) - What about you, what are you doing here? I did not understand this performance.

- Have you read the sign?

- No

- So read it.

- Bare Life. What is Bare Life?

- Have you heard of Giorgio Agamben?

- No, but I will research about it.

e) - What is the title of this work?

- It's on the sign.

- Where is the sign?

- It's on the floor, on this side.

- No, it's not; I think the cleaning lady cleaned it off by mistake.

f) - How long are you staying here?

- Three hours.

- What if your baby behaved differently, would you exhibit yourselves anyway?

- If she behaved differently how?

- Cried or screamed.

- Yes, I would, because that is real life.

g) - You know, I saw you here yesterday and was wondering what are a mother and daughter doing just sitting there.

- What do you think we are doing?

- I don't know.

- Have you ever seen a mother and daughter in an art exhibition?

- No.

- Well, we are exhibiting our relationship. Something so trivial in the eyes of the world that it got to the point of needing to be sacralised.

g) - What time is your performance going to start?

- It is already happening.

- i) - Did you know that it is very discomfoting when we walk past and see only the folded clothes on the bed? We wondered: where are the people.
- Well, do you think the clothes themselves show our vulnerability? Where are the people who should be wearing these clothes?
- j) - I have learned a great lesson with you: I wonder, will I be able to be a good father? When will I become a father? It is a big responsibility. I started thinking about my relationship with my family.
- We are never ready. The most important is being open to learning because we will never be perfect.
- k) - I can't go in there with you, can I? I would become part of the performance.

Figure 4. Paula e Lia. *Vida Nua*, 2013. Photograph by Will Aguiar

Figure 5. Paula e Lia. *Vida Nua*, 2013. Photograph by Will Aguiar

Figure 6. Paula e Lia. *Vida Nua*, 2013. Photograph by Will Aguiar

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