

Noise body, limit body by Paula Garcia

A present, exposed, close, concrete-real body, ready to be deciphered. A body that, in itself, is the essence of the piece, both subject and object (or maybe medium), constituting an aesthetic experience. And how do we, the observers, the audience, stand with our own bodies, before this other body that almost invades us? It was this question that could not leave my head when I first met Paula Garcia's work in 2010. At that time I was immersed in my doctoral research that had a central theme of the contradictions in the aestheticization of noise in music. And even before I knew the name of Garcia's piece—*Noise Body*—somehow, even without realizing it, I already felt the noisy dimension of what she did in her performances. My intention in my PhD was to investigate the passage from noise as a disruptive element to music. This relationship was directed toward an understanding of how noise has become a destabilizing element, establishing

a tension between its rejection and acceptance as a musical element.³⁵ Garcia's work led me to reconsider this dialectical process in which noise loses its noisiness when it is incorporated into art, since her performances were in fact noisy.

Paula Garcia (1975–) is an artist from São Paulo³⁶ who started in drama, but it was only during her late graduation (2002) in visual arts that she got to know what would become her main interest, performance art. Even before that, the viscosity of the presence of the body was already a part of her life. As the artist puts it, knowledge does not come from theory only, "it comes from experience, from the body, from listening."³⁷ It was after a brief passage through Teatro Oficina that her inclination for a striking and visceral performance action would emerge. This is not only due to coincidence: the Oficina promoted a true experimental revolution in the 1960s and still represents a space for renovation and experimentation in Brazilian dramaturgy.

Most of Garcia's works start from the limits of her own body, which is subjected to strenuous action through mental and physical propositions developed in front of an audience. These constructions are especially challenging, putting her body at a crossroads, having to resist all that is implied in the proposed action. As the artist herself reports: "It's like going to a production line. You have to do one thing, and you do that. The action and what is intrinsic to the action. You have to deal with thoughts and physical effort all the time. The experience brings to me the idea of another body, that this piece takes me to places that I have never been."³⁸

Two performances by Garcia, which in fact seem like a development of the same idea, caught my attention. The first was a set of pieces that came together in the series *Corpo-ruído* (Noise Body) (2008–2014) in which the artist used her own body, magnets, and iron. This series unfolded into a longer duration performance—*Corpo-ruído* (Crumbling Body) (2015)—in which she performed for eight hours a day, six days a week, for two months inside a magnetized box in the exhibition space, where she flung pieces of iron on the walls and ceiling. In either case, everything happened on and from her body. In *Noise Body* the artist would line her body with magnets onto which pieces of iron were flung, while *Crumbling Body*, the action was reversed: the artist herself threw pieces of metal onto the magnetic surfaces of the performance room.

The series *Noise Body* (2008–2014) consisted of several works in various formats, such as photography, video, and performance, in which the artist worked with neodymium magnets and pieces of iron collected from the metalworking industry. In *Noise Body* #2 (2010), a performative version of the piece, Garcia wore a custom-made outfit with strong magnets and created a situation in which her own body was partially paralyzed due to the weight of the iron pieces that were attracted to or thrown onto it. The magnetic clothing covered her whole body, including her head, and the performance consisted of some collaborators throwing pieces of iron, one by one, up to the limit supported by the performer's body and by the magnetism of the magnets. The performance also had a microphone positioned near the body of the artist, in order to capture and amplify the sounds of the metallic pieces plummeting from her body. Garcia supported the weight of the iron pieces and passively resisted the violence of the countless nails, plates, and all type of scrap metal being thrown against her magnetized body.

Sound is secondary in the work of Garcia and it would hardly be part of a collection on sound art understood in the strict sense of the field. But when Garcia starts using a setup of microphones and speakers facing the audience, she not only amplifies the sound but also amplifies its dramatic power, making people feel with their own bodies some of what she feels during the performances. The noisy sounds provoked by the pieces of iron falling on the floor is quite disturbing and causes a fulminating nuisance. Thus, noise exerts a dazzling power in her performances.

In 2010 she realized that sound impacts on people in such a way that the noise goes beyond its disruptive aspect—the loud bang of iron crashing on iron—so she added another noisy layer of resonance, or the identification of the audience with that suffering being inflicted on her. It is as if the audience feels on their own skin the materiality of the objects from the crashing sound produced by the impacts of the metal parts. The connection between sound and image in the performance exalts the suffering of a real body. The spatial distance between spectator and performer is narrowed by the sound that prevents the former from remaining passive in relation to the suffering of the latter.

The performance I did at Luciana Brito [art gallery] in 2010, was on top of a car, so it was iron on iron. There [the sound] began to draw my attention, because of the pieces of iron that collapsed and fell on the ground; it was as if they were pounding on the bodies of the people watching. And that leads me to reflect on these issues. So I turned the speakers to the audience and that amplified it, and gave a sense of what is happening to me over there ... in the audience's body. That, from 2010 onwards was something that became very strong for me.³⁹

In this kind of performance, much is demanded from the person doing it but also from those watching. At this point, I go back to my initial question: how do we, the spectators, perceive our own bodies before the collapse of the iron pieces and along with them? How do we form a positive idea of the body: a body that resists, that gives us sustenance, which indicates presence and permanence. Even in the somewhat aseptic environment of the galleries and museums where this performance took place, which favors a distanced contemplation of the works, the sound of the iron pieces strengthens the identification between what is happening with the artist's body and that of the observers. Contemplation is no longer possible.⁴⁰

In her long-duration work, *Crumbling Body*⁴¹ (see Figure 9.3), Garcia began to have a completely transformed relationship with her listening and she herself reflects upon it:

Since I was dealing all the time with the issue of exhaustion, from action to exhaustion, rest, exhaustion-rest, what happened was that the silence and the listening of what was happening in that environment were magnified. I had no contact with the audience, eye to eye ... But I had this larger listening, which is hard to explain. [I perceived the audience because of] the movement, the energy of people passing by, and also the number of people passing by ... So sometimes



Figure 9.3 *Corpo Ruído* (Crumbling Body) (Paula Garcia) performance realized at Sesc Pompéia (2015). Photo by Victor Nomoto.

I would sleep inside the box and then I would hear sounds of people speaking in a low voice, and later when I started the action, the noise was deafening and some people could not stay inside the space to watch the performance because they found it very loud ... it was beautiful to realize that these moments of silence and moments of listening in exhaustion were very magical moments, and it made me think of several things and led me to another research that I am doing now.⁴²

Although in appearance the piece refers to the materiality, physicality, and brutality exerted by the metal sucked by the force of the magnets, there is a less apparent but very significant dimension represented symbolically by magnetism, by the almost magical attraction exerted by its invisible forces. Many forces are put into play: the strength of a fragile body; the body of a woman resisting; the force of collapsing that can happen at any moment; and the nuisance caused by the imminent dismounting of the iron pieces from the body (in the case of *Noise Body*) and over the body (in the case of *Crumbling Body*). The artist herself points to this dimension:

The magnet in my work has always been an element that led me to discuss things that are fundamental visually and conceptually, which are the issues of forces. Visible, invisible forces, political, social forces, control systems. They are forces that act for the consolidation of a system of power that ends by shaping bodies, shaping feelings, shaping subjectivities, shaping truths. And what you see, in fact, are bodies dismantling, collapsing. It was as if it revealed the power. Shaping this body covered with debris, of garbage, but also that reveals something new.⁴³

In her own understanding of the work, the artist makes reference to the resistance and resilience of the human body in the face of the strenuous working hours that many bodies are still undergoing: “If we stop and think about the world we live in, in the brutal work experiences we have, we realize that there are still people who work that way, ten hours a day, sometimes more. Consider a sugarcane cutter for example who works twelve hours a day, and try to do that for two hours. You just cannot.”⁴⁴ And here I add some criticism. Faced with the brutality imposed on the bodies of sugarcane cutters, still very common in Brazil today, performance-art works may seem foolish.

The importance of talking about pieces such as *Noise Body* and *Crumbling Body* is that it eschews the possibility of discussing sound as an always constitutive experience of contemporary art without subscribing to any rigid disciplinary demarcation of the term. In this case, sound appears as a doubly camouflaged element. First, because it is absent in the initial conception: the artist begins to think of exploring sound only after she starts to perceive sound as a consequence of her actions during the performance. Second, because sound becomes evident in the work even when it is not audible. Anyone who sees a picture or reads a description of the work is able to imagine its sound impact, since it revolves around the materiality of the performer’s body and the metals she uses. A tension sets in between a body that is brittle and malleable, and metal, which is firm and rigid. And the sound arising from it comes from a mechanical, material connection between these metallic objects as they fall to the ground. Thus, the aural dimension in her works does not depend on the audibility of sounds. Sound hovers over the performances and imposes itself as a powerful presence.