



Filosofie e società nei prodotti culturali

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The book series *Sakura. Philosophies and societies in cultural products* aims to reflect on cultural products and their ability to shape the deepest and most recurring issues for individuals' and human societies' life. Films, comics and graphic novels, TV series, videoclips, literary works, artworks, music, and so on, may be considered as fragments in which the changing spirit of the age crystallizes, beyond the usual distinction between 'high' and 'low' art that prevents us from understanding the present in its relentless dynamic between the ephemeral and the eternal. Sakura wants to evoke just that dynamic through its name and its symbol, the cherry flower: like the blossoms of that flower, cultural products are born, develop and die in the floating world of everyday life.

At the same time, however, each one of them leaves an indelible trace of its having been there and its contribution to the more or less deep and enduring modification of the context in which it has been living.

SAKURA

Filosofie e società nei prodotti culturali

1. Flavia Monceri, *Anarchici. Matrix, Cloud Atlas*, 2014, pp. 82.
2. Adriano Fabris, *Fiction mortale. CSI - Crime Scene Investigation*, 2014, pp. 52.
3. Paolo Biondi, Fabio Corsini, Flavia Monceri, *UniversiCorti I. Tre sguardi sulla diversità*, 2014, pp. 76.
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11. Luisa Azzena, Paolo Biondi, Flavia Monceri, *UniversiCorti VI. Registe*, 2022, pp. 76.
12. Arno Plass, *Tango queer. Un artefatto trasformativo*, 2023, pp. 92.
13. Arno Plass, *Queer Tango. A Transformative Artifact*, 2023, pp. 92.

Arno Plass

Queer Tango

A Transformative Artifact

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Distribuzione

Messaggerie Libri SPA

Sede legale: via G. Verdi 8 - 20090 Assago (MI)

Promozione

PDE PROMOZIONE SRL

via Zago 2/2 - 40128 Bologna

ISBN 978-884676592-5

1. An emancipatory introduction

La vida es una milonga y hay que saberla bailar.
Que en la pista está sobrando el que pierde su compás.
La vida es una milonga y hay que saberla bailar.
Porque es triste estar sentado, mientras bailan los demás.

Life is a crazy milonga and you must know how to dance it.
You're no use on the dancefloor if you lose the rhythm's beat.
Life is a crazy milonga and you must know how to dance it.
Because it's sad just to sit there when all the rest are dancing.

Fernando Montoni & Rodolfo Sciammarella, translation by Alan Smith¹ the most famous interpretation by Pedro Laurenz and his Orchestra².

“Life is a crazy milonga³ and you must know how to dance it.” There is a grain of truth in this line of the lyrics – one must be able to do the right steps and join in the dynamics, both in the milonga and in everyday life. But the question intrinsic to the lyrics is whether one has the opportunity and the access to this crazy milonga, i.e., the opportunity to learn the steps and the

¹ <https://www.tango-amistoso.co.uk/la-vida-es-una-milonga/> – accessed 17 October 2021.

² I recommend listening to all the tangos mentioned in this essay. The reader can find them easily online on music/video specific sites or apps.

³ The *milonga* here is one of the three danced rhythms in the tango; the others are vals, and, of course, tango. The same word denotes the event where these rhythms are danced.

access to the dynamics that push the scenarios within which one moves. Hence, a saying like this also sounds suspicious, especially nowadays, insofar as in neoliberal times, it suggests the responsibility for a good life is only held in the hands of the individual. However, it is not only about learning the steps; much more is at stake here. Among others, the social sciences have pointed to the fact that it is our understanding and political realization of the sociocultural web that mostly decides whether or not one is able to somehow successfully participate in game of life. So, to avoid just sitting around feeling sad while all the rest are dancing, a transformation of the sociocultural sphere is needed, one that allows each individual to participate; a sphere of lived plurality. Or, to rephrase it in the context of dance, a sphere that allows for different steps, too.

Leaving Pedro Laurenz's valued interpretation of the *milonga* behind, I would now like to turn to Osvaldo Pugliese, who was maybe one of the most controversial figures of tango in Argentina and might be an appropriate inspiration for this text. Apart from being known for his exceptional musical expressiveness (e.g., *Emancipación*), which demands great bodily expressiveness from the tango dancers in the *milonga*, he was an avowed communist. Owing to his political convictions, he was imprisoned several times throughout his almost 90-year lifetime. Tango also accompanied him during old age, still performing with his orchestra in his late 80s.

Whether or not people agree with his political beliefs, I plan to draw on his personality throughout this essay as we learn about the connection between the things we do and their political implications, as well as their

impact on the creation of social spheres. Osvaldo Pugliese decided to make this obvious through the use of a carnation on the lapel of the suits he wore. His conviction was that an orchestra is a collective, in which the contribution of each musician and instrument was necessary to create good music. He thus did not keep the lion's share of the financial success, paying off his musicians as employees. Instead, he shared the money they received in equal parts, or gave someone a bonus when this person composed a tango. How much his political convictions influenced his tango arrangements as musical expressions is unclear – and might be a worthy topic for a musicologist. But still, everybody knew what political beliefs he held and shaped his thinking. As regards tango, he was definitely one of the people, in his times, who fundamentally changed what tango was and has been ever since. With the help of his orchestra, he created a modern style of tango, a different form of being played, listened, and danced to. The musicians left a striking imprint on this *artifact*.

In this text, *artifact* does not denote human-made objects. Instead, the term artifact refers to an evolving practice that redefines the notion of *factum* in the sense of an ongoing *faciens*: The use of the present participle *faciens* contrasts with the colloquial sense of the term which generally understands an artifact to be something that has been made and is therefore tangible, moveable, or accessible for use; in need of interpretation by many experts in possibly different ways; or even something that may be possessed by a single person. For the concept of artifact used in this text, the important thing to understand right from the start – and that is why we

are playing with words here, the *arte faciens* – is that the focus on the artifact is directed at that which is never complete, in the mode of being in a process of constant emergence. It is something within a dynamic movement, something evolving and thereby continuously transforming. Even though queer tango did not exist then and one may doubt whether he would have been part of this practice anyway, Osvaldo Pugliese's tango *Emancipación* again might serve as a background for understanding. The title derives from the Latin word, *emancipare*, which in Roman Antiquity meant the act by which the father made his son or daughter independent. Now, suggesting a similar intellectual and sociopolitical move, it is an apt description to characterize the act of non-hegemonic identities who seize power for themselves; it is about claiming equal rights in order to obtain the possibility of positioning oneself independently and transforming exclusionary social contexts into inclusive ones. Therefore, spaces must be provided, spaces where inclusive movements may take place and may consequently be incorporated⁴ – by the individual, by the collective. Although this text does not focus on the sociopolitical struggles and their consequences for queer people in this world, it does intrinsically touch on confronting these inequalities through the artifact of queer

⁴ Subtleties of signification or a peculiarity of the author ... while in many texts the reader might find the verb *to embody*, I prefer to use *to incorporate* – “embodiment” to my understanding stays too much within the dualism of mind/body, while “incorporation” here may denote corporeal appropriation. In this sense, the things we do are not *first* in our mind and *then* realized with our bodies. We always appropriate with our bodies and our senses. Understood in this way, *to incorporate* goes along better with the concept of *one's own body* used in this essay.

tango, since these struggles keep the community going – appropriating spaces and fighting for their rights.

In 2009, UNESCO declared tango to be an Intangible Cultural World Heritage,⁵ originating in the metropolises located at the Río de la Plata: Buenos Aires in Argentina and Montevideo in Uruguay. Cultural heritage is an artifact too, something that has been *made, produced* but which is not traceable to a single authorship. It also does not produce a thing that can be exhibited in an art space, screened in a movie theater, erected as an architectural sight, etc. It is much more a *factum*, the result of the fruitful collision of several cultural strands, displaying cultural meanings and, on the long run, providing a cultural symbolic. Still, it is artificial in the sense of *ars* – the Latin noun for skill, science, art, expertise – which we find in the term *artifact*: it is the product of artistic action and creation. This being the case, it offers possibilities of creating new forms of artistic expression. Cultural heritage is not limited to the artistic expression of artists only; it is accessible to the many and is also produced by our everyday lives. Cultural heritage lives and is passed on by the many individuals who contribute to it. Thereby, it travels and moves; it is *arte faciens*, an art in the continuing process of evolving.

This essay deals with the artifact of queer tango and its potential for a better future. I leave aside the rich and interesting history that qualifies tango as a cultural heritage because this would lead the essay in a different direction, guided by the questions of *who* defines (or is allowed to define) cultural heritage, *how* it is defined, *what*

⁵ <https://ich.unesco.org/en/RL/tango-00258> – accessed 12/10/2021.

is considered a part of it, and *who* as a result is allowed to commodify it. The issue of why tango is known globally as *Tango Argentino*, rather than *Tango Rioplatense*, might serve as a brief example. As already mentioned above, tango formed in the urban areas of the Río de la Plata and is mainly understood as an artifact of European migration. And yet this narrative somehow forgets to mention tango's African heritage that we find in its basic rhythm and other migratory influences coming, for example, from the former Ottoman Empire, in particular from the areas now known as Syria and Lebanon.

My focus here is on the *faciens* that happens right now, in our times. The *#BlackLivesMatter* movement, for instance, also calls on us to remember the African heritage in tango. Additionally, there is an ongoing discussion regarding tango music. On the one hand, *cantautores* (i.e., singer/songwriters) question many of the tango's famous lyrics since quite a lot of them are misogynistic and/or homophobic; therefore, many singers refuse to sing old tangos and are working intensely on writing new lyrics in a modern language and with modern images of social relations. On the other hand, these dynamics also effect in establishing fruitful encounters between contemporary tango composers and tango dancers – this is especially important as mostly old tango music is played at the *milongas*, since contemporary music is sometimes too complex and difficult to be danced to in social places; that is, in places that are not meant for professional, performative dancing. Queer tango, to come back to this essay's subject, addresses the power game between genders and its exclusionary implications. While the conventional tango scene continues to uphold the idea of a

heteronormative⁶ couple – claiming that it is traditional –, queer tango refuses to assign sex and/or gender to a couple or a danced role.

Queer tango is a heterogenous, non-unanimous movement that rejects the notion of being able to conserve an original tango but still believes in its traditions. In general, queer tango thus considers itself to be traditional – and in this sense, part of the cultural heritage – as it highlights its origins as a communicative dance practice that emerged in the streets. Queer tango, in this way, questions the gendered structure of the contemporary conventional *milonga* setting: The convention purges its origins and behaves in conformity with bourgeois ideals, denying the (auto-)exoticizing, identitary idea of a social order that praises its migratory, lower-class history. Conventional tango thereby excludes many people who would like to participate, be it because they incorporate a different gender concept, or be it because they do not fulfill contemporary class and/or beauty standards, etc. A reciprocal process can be noticed here: commonly gendered ideas are transposed to tango, while the freedom or subordination of one's expression and its

⁶ It is important to distinguish *heteronormative* from *heterosexual*. While the latter describes sexual desire and preference, the former points to dynamics that imprint the social sphere with the idea that this form of desire is the only one. It thereby produces moral, sociocultural, and political standards that extensively view the whole social sphere through the lens of sexual desire and fosters an unconsciously working coercion to adapt to certain (not only) gendered behaviors that complement each other. This means that heteronormativity shapes practices. An example in the context of this essay is the couple. A couple *might* be formed by a man and woman, but their sexual preference has nothing to do with the dance: it is imposed and shapes the social setting. More examples are to be found throughout the text.

moved utterances are being staged to perform the heteronormative drama. All this is disguised by claims to a traditional tango, or references to etiquette, but definitely in an intriguing but highly stereotyped guise. Succeeding in this social but unfair game means some kind of empowerment. Since dancers feel a sense of confirmation in their gendered expression in tango, they perform it equally, or even more so, outside the conventional dance scene. This means, tango dancing serves the staging of gender also outside of the *milonga*. In contrast, every time queer people dance, every time queer tango is talked about, queer tango confronts heteronormativity's power structures and questions them within the tango community, and hopefully contributes to this process also in other areas of life.

Contents

1. An emancipatory introduction	5
2. <i>La apertura</i> : a sidestep, or why transformative artifacts are important	13
3. Tango: a danced dialogue between anatomic possibilities and social convention	23
4. Some technique: physical principles hidden under sociocultural meaning	27
5. Bodies feel differently, bodies are felt differently	33
6. From leading/following to the <i>intercambio</i>	39
7. Transformation through bodily awareness	45
8. Movement and sociocultural meaning(s)	51
9. The <i>arte faciens</i> of queer tango	55
10. Framing some epistemic concepts to illustrate the case	59

1. <i>Plurality</i>	59
2. <i>Queer</i>	67
3. <i>One's own body</i>	71
4. <i>Touch</i>	75
11. Moving two steps forward and one step back: a conclusion	79
References	85

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Finito di stampare nel mese di luglio 2023