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Poetry and urban space: The *Phalène* as a poetic collective practice of placemaking and commonality

The "Phalène" is the poetic game or open round to the voice and figure of all, answering Lautréamont's "poetry must be made by all and not by one."¹

(Iommi et al. 1969: 1)

The *Phalène* (moth) or Poetic Act is a mode of poetry as collective action formulated by the poet Godofredo Iommi at the end of the 1950s in Valparaíso, Chile.² The poet organised the first Poetic Acts with a group of architects and artists from the PUCV School of Architecture and Design.³ Iommi continued working on his poetic proposal of the *Phalène* with a group of European poets and artists in the early 1960s while he lived in Europe.⁴ This article examines the *Phalène* by analysing unpublished documents that register the poetic experiences carried out in France during the 1960s and Ciudad Abierta (Open City) in the 1970s. Through analysing the *Phalène*, the article provides perspectives about the dialogue between art and the city around the notions of the ephemeral, commonality, and the resignification of the place.

¹ The authors have translated all the quotes in this article.

² Godofredo Iommi (1917–2001) was an argentinian poet, professor at the School of Architecture and Design at Pontificia Universidad Católica de Valparaíso, founding member of the Instituto de Arquitectura UCV and of the artistic community of Ciudad Abierta de Amereida, Chile.

³ The founding members of the PUCV School of Architecture and Design were the architects Alberto Cruz, Miguel Eyquem, Fabio Cruz, José Vial, Arturo Baeza, Francisco Méndez, and Jaime Bellalta, together with the poet Godofredo Iommi and the sculptor Claudio Girola.

⁴ Participating of the *Phalène* group in Europe were Godofredo Iommi, François Fédier, Jorge Perez-Roman, Francisco Méndez, Michel Deguy, Enrique Zañartu, Edison Simons, Sheila Hicks, Henri Tronquoy and José Laperyrere, amongs others.

The *Phalène* as a collective action in public space

This first section analyses a series of poetic experiences carried out in France by Godofredo Iommi in the 1960s. The participants of these experiences registered them in a travel log where they collected –“like a wound, which gave them origin”– various actions and reflections around the *Phalène* (Iommi et al. 1962: 25). Those who participated with Iommi in organising these first poetic experiences shared their perceptions and ideas after each poetic act. The group shared their perspectives, trying to discover the way and form of the *Phalène*, raising questions later explored in the following acts, always expectant and observing what happens in the city. Thus, shaping the *Phalène* was a process of discovery, where successive collective experiences revealed the very nature of this poetic practice.

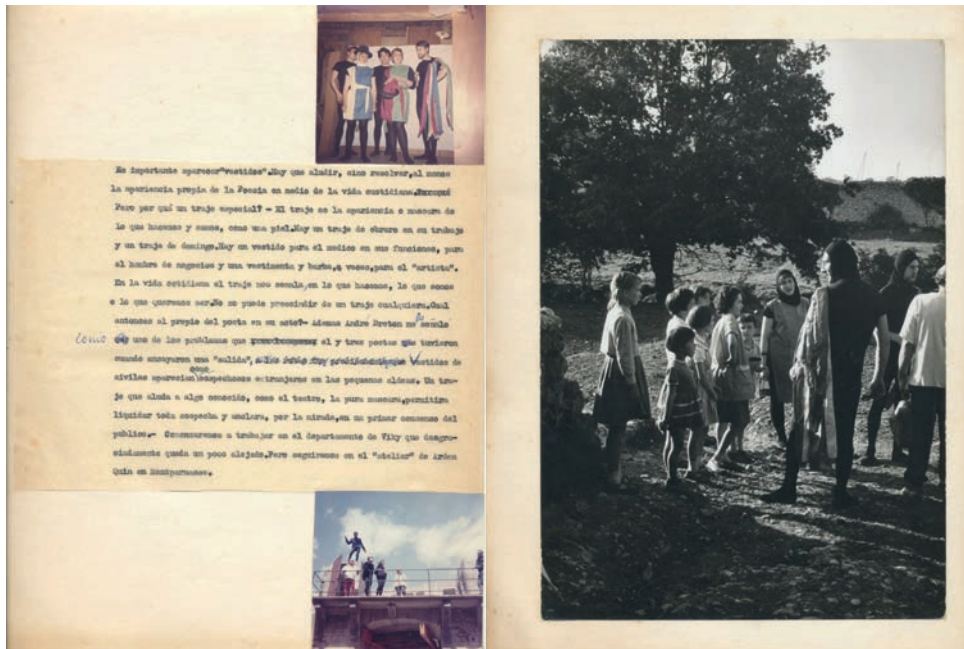


Fig. 1. Pages of the document with photographs and descriptions of the first poetic experiences in France, c.1962. Archivo Histórico José Vial Armstrong, Escuela de Arquitectura y Diseño Pontificia Universidad Católica de Valparaíso.

Based on these first poetic experiences, Godofredo Iommi published the *Lettre de l'Errant* (Letter of the Wanderer) in 1963. This publication is one of Iommi's main poetic manifestos, in which he poses the poetic foundations of the *Phalène* as a mode of poetry in action. Iommi's proposal arises from a central questioning of his poetic work: the question of the relationship between poetry and reality. In his *Lettre de l'Errant*, the poet affirmed that “poetry in action truly inserts into reality. She opens the possibility to fund all effective existence, and at the same time, it becomes an act in the world” (Iommi, 1963: 23). As a result of this pursuit, the poet seeks to detach from writing. In other words, Iommi proposed

a form of poetry that relinquishes the written word and relies only on the live voice and present body of the poet who submerges himself in reality to incite an act of creation.

For Iommi, the poetic word is capable of opening the known world to give birth to an unprecedented reality. The idea of the unknown relates to the emergence of the unexpected, a temporary irruption that brings new relationships. Accordingly, Iommi proposes the *Phalène* as an instrument to open reality to the unknown. The opening relies on the inaugural nature of the poetic word, which appears preceding all meanings, naming things again so that reality opens up to a field of multiple possibilities. The poetic act rearticulates the context, the people, the spaces, the atmospheres, and what happens in the place. Then, in the *Phalène*, the poet bursts into the city space and life with his present body and live voice to produce an extraordinary event of ludic and collective celebration capable of suspending the known world to reveal it as if for the first time.

The *Phalène* is an eminently collective act. In the first poetic experiences in France, the group determined that there had to be an order of actions according to each participant's background. Then, the *Phalène* is an action carried out by many: poets, architects, painters, sculptors and artists. The group that participates in a *Phalène* moves across the city from the public spaces of its urban centres to its obsolete outskirts, across open fields and rural areas between towns and even across continents. Furthermore, the collective nature of the *Phalène* not only relies on the group of poets and artists that are part of the caravan but also on everyone who wants to participate. While crossing the city, the participants of the *Phalène* invite passers-by to a poetic game and comply with Lautréamont's indication: "poetry must be made by all and not by one" (Lautréamont, 1988: 591). The *Phalène* is then an artistic action in the city, where artists from multiple disciplines and passers-by gather around a poetic game proposed by the poet. In this way, the understanding of the collective sense of the *Phalène* entails radically open participation, in which everything and everyone is part of the poetic act even when they do not know or consider themselves within it.

The radically open dimension of the *Phalène* manifests in Iommi's questioning of the possible dissolution of the relationship "interpreter-spectator." During their first poetic experiences in France, the group discussed an actor's aspirations when interpreting a theatre play and the spectators who, in turn, also expect something. The group questioned this relationship, proposing the *Phalène* as a practice that distances itself from a spectacle. On the interpreter's question, Iommi wonders, "what will happen to me when I am the interpreter or witness or 'act' of my own poetic words? A witness of poetry. It is a whole life and mode of existence" (Iommi et al., 1962: 31). Hence, in the *Phalène*, the interpreter activates the words and is not a character but has the nature of a witness, revealing the words in their apparition. For this reason, the *Phalène* distances itself from other contemporary practices such as performances or happenings.⁵

⁵ Situating the *Phalène* vis-à-vis discourses on participatory art and participatory place-making opens multiple proximities and distances around debates on authorship, site-specific approaches, and participatory process in their various ranges from community-based art to interaction. In this sense, an important distinction is that the *Phalène* is not activist or socially engaged; not even its action is considered an artwork. The *Phalène* is located prior to any manifestation of art because it is a pure poetic opening. Iommi differentiated the *Phalène* from the



Fig. 2. The poet Godofredo Iommi standing on a wall during a *Phalène* in France, c.1960. Archivo Histórico José Vial Armstrong, Escuela de Arquitectura y Diseño Pontificia Universidad Católica de Valparaíso.

Another critical question that appeared during the first poetic experiences in France was how the group could approach people in public places. In the first *Phalènes*, the group found that an atmosphere of shyness marked the encounter with the locals. In the narrations of these first poetic experiences, the group describes these contact with the locals as one characterised by mistrust and distance, but also curiosity. The children listened from afar and approached after the invitation to participate in the act of making poetry together. Iommi points out that in the poetic act, “real participation is in the disappearance of spectator and author. We are all simultaneously one, and the other, and poetry is key. The real poetry.” (Iommi et al., 1962: 36). The *Phalène* is a poetic practice where poetry triggers a sense of togetherness.

Once the act was over, when they were already heading back to the car, the children followed them, running and singing. Iommi refers to this instance of celebration and gratuitousness as “the festive, that is, this chosen hour when there are no more spectators nor interpreters” (Iommi et al., 1962: 36). The presence of poetry provoked the game, that particular and strange moment where confrontation dissolves, where

“provocative act, invented by the futurists, exacerbated by Dada, carried out by the surrealists, and recovered by the young North American poets and artists in the happening” in that the poetic act is “an apparition of poetry, whose fundamental characteristic is that it has no contradictor, it has nothing to denounce, it has nothing to refer to [...] it has only one thing as its objective: to reveal any human being its human condition.” (Iommi, Reyes 2011).

the interpreter and the spectator disappear to give way to the act and, with it, the festive. The festive manifests the absolute gratuitousness of the poetic act, fed by everyday life and reciprocity. Gratuitousness produces an unusual temporary break that makes room for the mutual, where everything transforms.

The poet's presence triggers the passage from the quotidian rhythm of everyday urban life to the extraordinary festive event of the *Phalène*. The poet's character is evident in the *Phalène*, as the one enabling and opening space and time to encourage the appearance of that in common. Iommi points out, "it is necessary to obey the poetic act with and despite the world to unleash the festive; and the festive is the game, utmost rigour of my freedom. Such is the poet's mission because the world must always be passionate again" (Iommi, 1963: 21). For this reason, Iommi proposes that the poet is the "bearer of the festive. He is the bearer of probabilities because, with his presence, he triggers unforeseen relationships and provokes active participation in games in order to fulfil what we were told: 'poetry should be made by all and not by one.'" (Iommi, 1963: 21-23) Thus, poetry in action unleashes a playful instant where the participants remain expectant towards what poetry may indicate; it is an instrument for the festive to occur.

To produce the atmosphere that leads to the extraordinary, the poets and artists who summon the poetic game dress with paper costumes and masks. These costumes are employed to place those who walk through the city in a different environment and disposition. By recognising the passage from the quotidian to the extraordinary, the costumes dispose the passers-by to leave everyday life and enter the playful spirit of the *Phalène*. Along with the costumes, before the eyes of passers-by, the *Phalène* begins with *El Desdichado* by Gerard de Nerval, which according to Iommi, "sets the fundamental tone of the *Phalène*" (Iommi et al., 1986: 204). After this opening poem, the poet proposes a game that can use drawn cards or other implements to evoke words in those who participate. The poet collects these words to shape a poem made by all. In this way, the city and its multitude form part of the poetic act.



Fig. 3. Students of the Valparaíso School of Architecture and Design during a *Phalène* in Reñaca, 1972. Archivo Histórico José Vial Armstrong, Escuela de Arquitectura y Diseño Pontificia Universidad Católica de Valparaíso.

The *Phalène* as a poetic act of placemaking

This second section examines the *Phalène* as a placemaking practice reviewing the poetic acts carried out in Ciudad Abierta in the early 1970s.⁶ Ciudad Abierta is a field of experimentation for the arts, set to explore the relationship between poetry and trades. In Ciudad Abierta, the poet is present, and his presence sets the origin of any work with the celebration of a *Phalène*. Thus, Ciudad Abierta and its works take place in a poetic temporality, that of the intermission of *Phalènes*. Iommi called the poetry of Ha-Lugar, that mode of poetry that deals with the opening of places by indicating its origin.

The departure point that sets the work's origin occurs as soon as the poetic act provokes the crossing between the word and the place. This crossing reveals the places to an unprecedented destination by opening the field of its possibilities. The words that appear in the *Phalène* signal the place, and the action that befalls brings questions about the place. The painter Jorge Pérez-Román, who participated in several poetic experiences in Europe and South America, indicates that a fundamental characteristic of the *Phalène* is being able to "turn the landscape inside out like a glove" (Iommi et al., 1962: 29). That sense of surprise and astonishment, of showing things as if for the first time, is the inaugural potential of the *Phalène*. The poetic act reveals the place as for the first time; it is a beginning that provokes a turn in what is present there.



Fig. 4. Opening poetic acts of the land in Ciudad Abierta, c.1972. Archivo Histórico José Vial Armstrong, Escuela de Arquitectura y Diseño Pontificia Universidad Católica de Valparaíso.

The poetic acts for opening the Ciudad Abierta grounds took place in November 1968 and consisted of a series of games. Through these games, the group proposed exploring two words, abandonment and limit. The poetic act does not necessarily seek to provide a particular meaning to the word but to put them in uncertainty. Thus, the group did not carry out the opening poetic acts to reach a specific result but to initiate a path of elucubration that would allow the group to begin thinking and building Ciudad Abierta.

⁶ Ciudad Abierta is located north of Valparaíso and was founded in 1970 by the School of Architecture and Design members.

During the opening acts of Ciudad Abierta, the group referred to the sense of place that emerges from the poetic act as “the unpunctual [...] a long stay that in all its parts is at the same time beginning and end.” (Iommi, Cruz, 1971) This notion refers to the idea that the construction of Ciudad Abierta does not follow any planning; its realisation is marked only by that inaugural moment of the poetic act. The poetic act opens the way to a novel comprehension of the place indicated by the voice of poetry. The place resignifies the word, and the word finds a place. The word then not only makes the place appear but also shows the nature of the territory. The *Phalène* brings to light the directive of the place over the landscape. Hence, the poetic act provokes the appearance of that directive where the landscape opens up to be inhabited.

From the collective poetic action, the *Phalène* reveals the place from its singularity, which gives origin to a plastic intervention carried out by the artists and participants. These plastic interventions of the artists that mark the place from the poetic action were known as “signs”:

We have traced signs. The event becomes verbs and actions in multiple ways. [...] Then the event becomes chantier, and each of us becomes chantier. Some signs are now executions. That is why the gaze reaches the hands at a given moment to ignore the mind and the heart. [...] Construction hands of occasions: of the cities. Hands of love for the work that goes beyond servile jobs and keep the relationship between sign and work. (Iommi et al., 1986: 138–140).

The sign marks the new perspective of the place that emerged from its crossing with the poetic word that names its singularity. This sign can be ephemeral and quickly disappear. Its existence or realisation in no way determines the success of the *Phalène* since she is accomplished in the pure present moment of the poetic act. The plastic intervention of artists cyphers the newly revealed sense of place, not from the landscape, but the signification of the poetic word, the sign of the place. Then, the expressions of the poetic acts have their distinctions on each occasion, marking the unrepeatable present moment of the *Phalène*.



Fig. 5. A sign in Ciudad Abierta done during a *Phalène* in 1977. Archivo Histórico José Vial Armstrong, Escuela de Arquitectura y Diseño Pontificia Universidad Católica de Valparaíso.

The extension of the ephemeral, the construction of commonality and the signification of the place from the word

The analysis of the poetic practice of the *Phalène* reveals critical characteristics that can provide new perspectives on the dialogue between art and the city. The first aspect concerns the ephemeral nature of the word and its presence in the city. With the *Phalène*, poetry is inserted into reality, becoming part of it. The poet exposes himself to the city and its events, surpassing the written poem. In Iommi's words, the poetic act "does not leave a 'work'; but it inserts into a path deeper and more hidden than the book: the legend" (Iommi, 1963: 23). Then, the *Phalène* is a practice that reveals the place from the uttered word in the extension of the city. This sense of place appears in the present and is untimely and ephemeral.

Although the *Phalène* happens in the ephemeral moment of the uttered word, the poetic action echoes in the new meanings that the participants articulate from the collective experience of the place. Poetry appears in that reciprocity of presences: poet and citizens. The playful game frames interaction in public space as a motor of collective action that builds commonality. Hence, through word of mouth and encounters with others, the *Phalène* constructs meaning in common of the place. In this way, the possibility of housing artistic action in the public sphere opens up from the collective encounter and the uttered word.

The open condition of public spaces places art in a challenge, where the uncertainty of the unexpected in the city becomes a potentiality for the work. The *Phalène* opens the possibility of inhabiting public spaces and resignification everyday life. Iommi points out that "for us, all the unusual reality and all the wonderful everyday life [...] are there in the poetic adventure." (Iommi, 1963: 24). Thus, the *Phalène* is a way of being together with others to produce an unexpected present in the city from the poetic word. The *Phalène* opens an extraordinary instance in the city, turning the unforeseen and unpredictable into a gift.

The *Phalène* is a practice that occurs in movement through the territory. In this movement, the *Phalène* reconnects and weaves urban space and life, making it possible to gather the dispersed. The movement in the *Phalène* is not a functional journey or mere displacement but rather an expectant dwelling on the urban, aiming to unfold the city from novel perspectives. Therefore, the *Phalène* is a new possibility of the city each time, intertwining the urban fabric and providing new meanings when the inhabitants gather around the poet's words. As a result, the urban extension unfolds as a field with multiple alternatives of appropriation and participation. Furthermore, the *Phalène* opens to an experience of the city as a multiplicity of places revealed as equivalent by the poetic word.



Fig. 6. *Phalène* in the park Quinta Vergara, Viña del Mar. 1971. Archivo Histórico José Vial Armstrong, Escuela de Arquitectura y Diseño Pontificia Universidad Católica de Valparaíso.

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Abstract

The article examines the *Phalène* or Poetic Act, a mode of poetry as collective action formulated by the poet Godofredo Iommi. The authors analyse how the *Phalène* opened a creative heritage from the early experiences carried out by Iommi in Europe during the 1960s to the current poetic endeavours of the School of Architecture and Design PUCV in Valparaíso, Chile. Through analysing the *Phalène*, the article provides new perspectives on the relationship between poetry and urban space. About this relationship, the authors propose the *Phalène* as a poetic act of placemaking in which the ephemeral presence of the uttered word unleashes ludic interactions in the participants provoking the construction of commonality and the resignification of the place.

Keywords: Poetic Act, Open participation, Collective placemaking, Sense of place, Ciudad Abierta.

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