

## dora smék + paul setúbal: opositores

01.10 – 12.11.2022

### Game Theory

Benjamin Seroussi\*

#### The Thumb

In “thumbs-up land”, thumb wrestling is no small thing: here is a game whose goal is to forcefully pin the other person’s thumb. In recent years, with the index finger entering the game, the debate has been broadened – whether horizontally, thus making the thumb perpendicularly point upwards, simulating something that looks like a gun; or vertically, sticking the thumb horizontally, and thus fingerspelling what in Brazilian Sign Language stands for the letter L. These thumb/index configurations will soon make way for the traditional use of index and middle fingers gesturing a “V”, for “victory”.

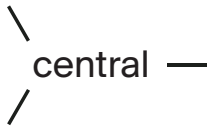
So that the thumb doesn’t go back into oblivion, here we are, during this month marked by various elections (for president, governors, state representatives, congressmen and senators) to devise some ancillary considerations on Dora Smék and Paul Setúbal’s artwork *Opositores* (Opponents). We’re not only in between run-offs, but also in that break from the gallery’s schedule that takes place after the dismantling of an exhibition and the next one’s installation: it’s this days-long place of suspension Dora and Paul have chosen to take up, just like all positions of power must be taken up.

Well then, we need to talk about the thumb, or, rather, thumb wrestling – also known as thumb war. Stemming from mysterious origins (with roots in Japan), simple rules and global popularity, the sport has recently gained a federation (WTWC), a guidebook written by a former champion, and an offshoot – toe wrestling! Without mentioning the fact that thumb wrestling’s recent structuring seems to have been developing primarily in dive bars in the UK countryside, it’s worth to say toe wrestling will never destitute traditional thumb wrestling, for a simple reason: the handshake.

#### The Hand

There lies the beauty of thumb wrestling: it’s not played with someone whose hand couldn’t be shaken. Beyond the adiposity of the other person’s skin, in order to surrender to the game, one needs to acknowledge their adversary not as their enemy, but as their opponent. Hence, “adversary”. Since “opponents”, which names Dora and Paul’s work, does not refer so much to the contenders as it does to the thumb itself, which, as known by all those who have been educated by Jorge Furtado’s film *Ilha das Flores*, draws its power from the fact that it is, precisely, opposable. What would become of us without the opposable thumb dexterity that emerged millions of years ago? What about thumb wrestling?

Economists have highlighted the relevance of looking into games (such as the prisoner’s dilemma, among others) to model the complexity of human relations, economic behavior and conditions for the emergence of cooperation. Even Nobel Prizes have been granted to the study of the so-called “Game Theory”. Looking at the present context, humble thumb wrestling is our tragicomic contribution to this scientific debate in which games serve as minimal expressions that help clarify the dynamics in which we live. However, *Opositores* is not about looking at the game itself, since it’s frozen: the artists’ hands have been cast as a single bronze piece. They’re



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locked in an everlasting handshake, staging moves that are now immortalized: upward-extended thumb, alert, provoking, defensive, attacking or ready to attack. Our gaze is then led to the conditions under which the game is played: in chains.

### The Chain

Tension does not lie in the hands, which were cast as a single structure, but in the wrist. Instead of arms, the hands end in a cross-section displaying bronze rings linked to hooks. These hooks are, in their turn, hung by long chains fixed to the walls. Whenever confronted with severed limbs, our brain has a hard time analyzing what it's seeing. Especially in the present case, in which the hands are stuck together and the tension from the chains does not seem to jeopardize the flawless handshake. Instead, it ensures the hands' steady suspension at a certain height.

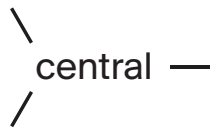
Chains allow the game to take place. Chains and social networks have, by the way, marked our times, creating and inventing arguments, sustaining endless conversations despite being as frozen as the hands in *Opositores* – with no one ever letting their guard down. In a way, *Opositores* is a monument to lost "playfulness", since it reminds us of the fair play we've lost, as well as the respect for our adversary and the importance of contradiction. TV debates are more and more stressful and regimented: amongst counterclaims, rebuttals and fake news, they're conversationless debates that lack minimum conditions for dialogue, i.e. listening and being heard. Nostalgic thumb wrestling could replace this debate simulacrum with no major damage.

### Space

While walking amongst "Opositores" tensioned chains, we realize there's something we share: space. Even through the stressful times we live, there's common ground going beyond differences: the acknowledgement of going through a storm of fake news (even if we can't agree on which are the true ones) and the feeling of being daunted by violence and by eventual retaliations that might take place once we reveal our political views. Within this unbreathable shared space, it's important to tell violence from conflict. Wherever there is room for conflict, it can be settled, lowering the risk of violence.

An interesting phenomenon from the past elections have been "vote-swaying", not so much because of the somewhat authoritarian act of thinking someone is more knowledgeable about voting than others as for the urge to talk, face conflict and divergence, and take the risk of being affected. Suddenly, away from the abstract violence of social networks, it's clear we also create chains, and depend on each other, going beyond economic exchange or conviviality discomfort: the bus fare collector doesn't sell bus tickets only, just like the baker doesn't just sell bread; and neighbors do more than just reminding us of noise regulation statutes... Others are once again citizens, that is, people whose decisions impact us and, therefore, whose opinions matter to us and to whom we should talk.

Circulating between section lines, the conversation needs to go beyond the elections. To that end, venues (maybe they be art-related or not) are key places – where people can practice the daily action of politics: distributing power, talking one-on-one, disrupting beliefs that maintain pre-talked conversations, listening and being heard. Like a muscle one needs to work out



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everyday so that it functions adequately. And, in the beginning, it really hurts. A daily practice before any conversation should perhaps be a thumb warm-up followed by thumb wrestling, so that, from thumb to thumb, we might better measure the distance that brings us closer to each other to face the simple – yet intricate, constant and unresolved – practice of democracy construction.

With hope,  
October 1<sup>st</sup>, 2022

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