

# VIVID [RADICAL] MEMORY

V[R]M

Workshop  
Barcelona

Radical Conceptual Art revisited:  
A social and political perspective from the East and the South

## The latent discourse in Brazilian art in the 1970's <sup>1</sup>

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At an edition of the Canal 100, the official news agency presented before the main films were exhibited in the 1970's, in one of the news, general Garrastazu Médici, a dictatorship president chosen without election, declared: "Nobody can hold these people. They march to a promising future in a straightforward manner". The FIFA World Cup, hold in Mexico in 1970 seemed to prove this boasting and inflammatory speech, very characteristic of the official discourse of the media and of the politicians from that period. Nevertheless, while the supporters' football idols proved right the "Brazilian miracle" announced in the economy, many people had to leave the country because they became political exiles, either willingly or unwillingly, in Europe, the United States of America or in other Latin America countries that had not yet been taken up by the military dictatorship.

If the official discourse and manifest was proud and boasting, the latent discourse, performed by artists and intellectuals, denounced the lack of liberty in the daily life.

In 1970, for example, at the catalogue of the exhibition. Information, that would mark the decade, held at MoMA in New York, Hélio Oiticica denied vehemently that he represented Brazil. At the catalogue, he introduced to the North-American public some aspects of the Tropicália

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<sup>1</sup> About this topic, see: FREIRE, CRISTINA. *Arte Conceitual*. Rio de Janeiro, Jorge Zahar Editor, 2006.

[Tropicalia] and of his most comprehensive Environmental Programme.

It is interesting to observe that in each topic of his Environmental Programme, Hélio Oiticica draws closer to the notion of a "de-materialized" art, a term used by Lucy Lippard to name critically the works that, above all, would mark the following decade. The public, called by Hélio Oiticica "participator" is the propelling engine of the work and assumes the critic position in the ethic and political dimension through the denial of being passive.

Artur Barrio had also sent photos and a film – Situações TE [TE Situations] and Trouxas Ensangüentadas [Bloody bundles] – to that antological exhibition, Information (1970). Cildo Meireles presented works from his project Inserções em circuitos ideológicos [Insertions in the Ideological Circuit], and his work was very emblematic for that period. The Projeto Coca-Cola and the notes of money project, carried out throughout that decade, dealt with the distribution systems of the daily exchanges and adopted a guerilla strategy when the networks were considered as means. The artist takes hold of objects that circulate in our daily exchange and subverts their meanings with incisive words and sentences. The sentences are very provocative, such as "Quem matou Herzog?" ["Who killed Herzog?"], and represented a direct blow in the situation Brazilian society faced at that moment. The death of the Brazilian journalist Wladimir Herzog, for example, was officially announced as a suicide; however, we all know he was killed under torture of the military government. The artist stamped this threatening and inconvenient question in notes of money that certainly would not be destroyed and they would return into circulation as a graffiti that could move around. It was a strategy for a critical note inserted into the daily reality. On the Coca-Cola bottle, the main icon of the North-American colonialism

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<sup>2</sup> [NT] Herzog was journalist killed by the military dictatorship on October 1975.

–, Cildo Meireles printed the following sentence: “Yankees, go home”. The clandestine words spread themselves on the items that pass more rapidly from hand to hand in the big cities: Coca-Cola bottles and notes of money. The use of Coca-Cola bottles and of notes of money resulted in the dissolution of the artist figure in order to reach a more comprehensive system of exchange than the conventional system of art, something the dictatorship could not possibly control. For the artist what matters is the possibility of inserting himself in the daily life in order to create some noise and significance in the social body, that is, in order to make visible the notion of networks and circuits, social aspects that by definition are abstract and invisible. Inserções em circuitos ideológicos [Insertions in the Ideological Circuit] functioned within the controlling systems of non-centralized information and brought about a more activist perspective for the critic dimension of the ready-made Duchampian.

The term “Arte de Guerrilha” [“Guerilla Art”] was coined by Frederico Morais in 1969 when he commented the works of Artur Barrio, Cildo Meireles, Antônio Manuel, among others. Therefore, the body and the actions of the artists begin to be the privileged locus where the social, political and subjective aspects are configured in their multiple senses and directions. Thus, the traditional concept of works of art and the institutional places for their exhibition become unsustainable.

In Brazil, Hélio Oiticica wrote a text at the exhibition catalogue of the “Nova Objetividade” [“New Objectivity”] exhibition held at Museu de Arte Moderna do Rio de Janeiro [Rio de Janeiro Modern Art Museum] in 1967 that would be seminal to the contemporary art, and not only in Brazil. He established some topics that he developed in his very singular programme, and they were the following: “1. General constructive will; 2. Tendency towards the denial of the object and overcoming of the easel painting; 3. Public

participation (corporal, tactile, visual, semantic participation, and etc.); 4. Approaching and positioning in relation to the political, social and ethical issues; 5. Tendency towards the collective propositions and the consequent abolition of the many "ism" in today's art, an aspect that characterized the first half of XX century (a tendency that can be embodied in Mário Pedrosa's concept of "post-modern" art); 6. The resurgence and new formulations of the anti-art concept".

The increasing inefficacy of the art categories, traditionally connected to the means and techniques (painting, sculpture, drawing and printing) make evident the need of a profound reconsideration of the paradigms that were already present at the end of the 1950's and became consolidated in the following decades. From that moment onwards, it has been relevant the expansion of the art fields through new means, such as the videoart, something that is not such a novelty nowadays; the inter-relationship between the various artistic manifestation; poetry, performing arts, music and the inclusion of other fields of study, such as, for example, anthropology, linguistic and psychoanalyses in the analyses and understanding of the artistic projects from that period. As a consequence of the revisionism of the History of Contemporary Art and of the criticism agenda of the post-colonial theories, today, many decades after that manifest, the works of Hélio Oiticima and Lygia Clark have been assimilated in the new presentation of the collection of the hegemonic narrator of the History of Western Art, the MoMA, in New York, after its last renovation. It is worth observing that the separation between the Latin American collection and the international collection disappeared in the museography project after this recent renovation when the museum reopened to the public in the end of 2004.

Robert Rauschenberg's and Eva Hesse's works are in the same gallery of the museum, sided by Lygia Clark's Bicho [Bicho] and Hélio Oiticima's Bólido [Bolid]. The fact is that never

so many Brazilian artists were in exhibition: Hélio Oiticica, Lygia Clark, and also Mira Schendel, Rivane Neuenschwander and the designers Campana brothers. Moreover, in this particular revisionism, it is worth mentioning the influence of the Brazilian curators as Paulo Herkenhoff and the financial support of the art collector Patrícia Cisneiros. If the rewriting of the hegemonic History of Art has been more assimilated lately by institutions, the de-construction of the conventional categories has been performed for decades in the contemporary art field.

In Brazil, the artist Artur Barrio has been producing projects whose poetic marks the rupture – either by the actions he performs or by the material he chooses –with all the categories or hegemonic codes of art.

In the situação P.....H.....(1969), the artist's gestures re-signify such a simple material as the toilet paper and attest the essential to creation that is completed "in function of the wind, the water, the city and the body".

Even though they were virtually unknown to the Brazilian artists in the 1960's and 1970's, of all the poetics and artistic programmes that our century produced perhaps the International Situationists<sup>3</sup> were the ones, after the Surrealists, who better drew closer to the idea and the experience of a city impregnated by symbolic content, capable of articulating art and politics.

The experience of the errancy of the Surrealists, together with the Situationist *dérive*, suggests a programme of exploration of the city. Contemporary artists, especially in the performance art domain, have used the experience of wandering around the city. However, at that time, Brazilian artists refused to use the term performance as its theatrical connotation emptied the meaning of their activity – the engaged meaning, as they would say at that time.

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<sup>3</sup> See: FREIRE, Cristina. *Além dos mapas. Os monumentos no imaginário urbano contemporâneo*. São Paulo: SESC / Annablume, 1997, p. 67-69.

There is no record of Barrio's project 4 dias 4 noites [4 days 4 nights], realized in Rio de Janeiro, in 1970, except the artist's memories about that event. Performance without a public, action without destination, the artist demands a lot of himself, up to limit of his body exhaustion. Here, the psychogeography suggests the insanity that arises from the exacerbated senses at streets of the city. In a sieged city, the body's lack of deriving/deviating control could be a synonym of creation.

The body and actions of some artists such as Cildo Meireles, Hélio Oiticica, Lygia Clark, Lygia Pape, Antônio Manuel, Paulo Bruscky, among others come to be the privileged locus where the social, political and subjective aspects are configured in their multiple senses and directions. After the Museu de Arte Moderna do Rio de Janeiro [Museum of Modern Art - Rio de Janeiro] refused to accept the artist's body as a work of art in the National Salon, Antônio Manuel presents himself naked on the opening day of the exhibition. The photos produced at that moment became the axis of his Corpobra [Bodywork] (1970) and they appeared printed on the first page of the newspaper O Dia [The Day] in his "clandestine insertions".

In Brazil, the daily newspaper was also used as a mean to disseminate the artists' projects. As a form of alternative circulation, the series Clandestinas [Clandestines], by Antônio Manuel, is exemplary as it takes by assault the pages of the newspaper to publish his projects, as it could not be presented at the museum. In his project 0-24 horas [0-24 hours], he presents the iconographic material - all the projects censored by Museum in Rio de Janeiro in that year, 1973, in six pages of this conventional Rio de Janeiro's newspaper. The exhibition lasted as long as the newspaper was on the newsstands, that is, twenty four hours. The printed page of a conventional newspaper aligned various propositions that were very dear to the artists at that moment, that is, to find other exhibition spaces besides

the galleries and museums, to get closer to a broader and more diversified public and, eventually, to blow up any possibility of having work-object-merchandise.

However, in the national context, what one can notice is that these forms of information dissemination seek to break the censorship imposed on them. In 1970, Cildo Meireles publishes in the "Advertisement Section" of *Jornal do Brasil* two of his *Inserções* [Insertions], two advertisements created by the artist.

These *Inserções em jornais: classificados* [Insertions in newspapers: ads] that would be fully developed in the series *Inserções em circuitos ideológicos* [Insertions in the Ideological Circuit], that is, they point to the control variables and the data and information dissemination through their waywardness and ideological channels.

At the same period, the publications of artists in the shape of artisan-like magazines were abundant and they were also distributed by mail. Articulated with the counter-culture, these artists were contemporary of the "mimeograph generation" of the marginal poetry. At that moment, there was a great proliferation of the various confections, newspapers, fanzines (fan-created magazines), stamps, seals, cards and a quantity of meaningful lists of addresses of the "who is who" type. In this sense, these artists were the precursors of the Internet, although the postal network was a less agile Internet – more concerned with the form-content relationship. At that time, there were many hybrid projects that articulated the mail art with artists' books, a sort of collection of offset printing, photocopies and cards. This circulation of the works sent by mail created a file-concept that circulated at the edges of the official circuit and oscillated between the permanent and the transitory, between the public and the private and between the global and the local.

This text correspond to the presentation that took place at the Barcelona Workshop in May, 2007.

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