

Perspectives of social in Brazilian contemporary art: discussing project *Comboio*, Favela Moinho, 31st Bienal de São Paulo

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Abstract

Since the 2000, the preoccupations with the social dimensions of art have given rise to new strategies in the intersection between art and political activism in Brazil. In the early 70s, already worried about the encroachment of the entertainment industry in art, the critic Mário Pedrosa (1900–1981) proposes political action as the only way to break the circle, creating new conditions for the emergence of a new man and the flourishing of a new art. Within this context, this paper critically discusses “the uses of art” through project *Comboio* at Favela Moinho, São Paulo, in the context of the 31st Bienal de São Paulo. The *Comboio* acts in “informal spaces” in the central area of São Paulo and describes itself as a project of research and urban intervention. As the last remaining favela in central São Paulo, Moinho provides a crucial counterpoint in cultural terms and conditions to the Bienal, located in Ibirapuera Park. Can this be seen as a contemporary example of what Mário Pedrosa called, in his criticism of art and politics, “authentic artists” who distinguish themselves from the “silkworm” of mass production to take up the defensive position of what he calls “rearguard art”?

Keywords: uses of art; Mário Pedrosa; 31st Bienal de São Paulo.



Picture 1. Online collaborative map developed by Arquitetura da Gentrificação (AG), a group that collects, archives and disseminates information about human rights violations committed by public officials against the residents of Favela Moinho. Each icon on the map addresses a violation.

Source: <http://reporterbrasil.org.br/gentrificacao/mapa-colaborativo-denuncia-violencia-cometida-contra-moradores-da-favela-do-moinho>, accessed on 09-04-2015.

Favela Moinho resists

Favela Moinho started 25 years ago with the occupation of the urban land under the overpass where was located the Matarazzo mill (*moinho*),

which earned it the name¹. Recently, the settlement was the target of two suspected arsons², after which

¹About the history of Favela Moinho: Arquitetura da Gentrificação - <http://reporterbrasil.org.br/gentrificacao>, accessed April 9, 2015.

its continued existence has become a symbol of resistance against property speculation and for housing rights in the most populated city of South America. Between the first and second fires, the local government of São Paulo built a 8 metre high wall – “the wall of shame”, as the community has called it – with the stated purpose of isolating the burned area from the rest of the inhabited area. Today, 480 families have a temporary legal title to remain in Favela Moinho. The local organization Movimento Moinho Vivo, created in 2013 through the initiative of dwellers and community partners, presently conducts studies with a view to building a participatory urbanization project.



Picture 2. “This is a paintbrush”. Source: <http://projetcocomboio.wix.com/projetcocomboio#page4/cfvg>, accessed on 09-04-2015.

Comboio: mobile political activism in affirmative actions of the right to the city

Comboio defines itself “as a project (in action) of research and urban intervention, which since 2010 operates in ‘informal spaces’ in the center of São Paulo, seeking ways to exercise and assert the right to the city”³. The researches conducted in the

intervention sites are run by real demands of the communities to create exercises of empowerment of the local actors and appropriation of underutilized space⁴. The main objective is to strengthen the relation of territorial belonging through the creation of interactive, inclusive and participatory public spaces inside communities.



Picture 3 – To the right: Public House. To the left: Vermelho Park. Source: <http://projetcocomboio.wix.com/projetcocomboio#page4/cfvg>, accessed on 09-04-2015. #NóisPorNóis! #FavelaDoMoinhoResiste! #ContraEspeculaçãoImobiliária! #PorTodasAsFavelasDoBrasil! #LutasAutônomas! #PoderPopular!

Comboio is working at Favela Moinho since 2012. There were four starting points for the actions in Favela Moinho: public art, bottom-up micro urban planning, popular financing, ethics and citizenship. The project is structured in two phases, each of which built public forums: “The Public House” (phase 1) and “Vermelho Park” (phase 2), carried out in partnership with Movimento Moinho Vivo. All interventions are directly funded by the community, without intermediaries, through donations of money and other resources used exclusively for the creation of these public spaces in the community. During the execution of these actions, *Comboio* and Movimento Moinho Vivo also co-organized the destruction of “the wall of shame” in August 2013, meeting the community's demand for an escape route in case of a new fire in the area.

The four points in *Comboio's* methodology for the construction of Public House⁵ and Vermelho Park⁶ were (1) mobilization of the residents in order to gather materials and volunteer work for the project; (2) activation and mobilization of services by municipal agents; (3) popular funding (donation of

²In 2011, the first fire destroyed a third of the community and left 600 people homeless. In 2012, the second fire consumed 80 homes and injured several people. Before the two large fires, the community was inhabited by 1,200 families (around 5000 people). The fires in the Brazilian favelas are not isolated cases, but rather a systemic problem connected to land speculation. In São Paulo, between 2005 and 2012, more than 800 fires were registered. Source: Movimento Passe Livre São Paulo – <http://saopaulo.mpl.org.br>, accessed April 9, 2015.

³*Comboio* was involved at the following occupations: Ocupação Sérgio Buarque de Holanda (2007), Ocupação Prestes Maia and São João (2010) and Ocupação Cambuci (2012), all of them in São Paulo. *Comboio* is coordinated by artists Caio Castor and Flavia Lobo de

Felicio. About *Comboio*: <http://projetcocomboio.wix.com/projetcocomboio>, accessed April 9, 2015.

⁴The project involves the memory of the residents in relation to their own knowledge and technologies. The common spaces were built using materials locally available or collected in the immediate surroundings.

⁵ The Public House was inaugurated in June, 2013. The project's accounts can be accessed at: <http://projetcocomboio.wix.com/projetcocomboio#!transparncia/c1s1il>, accessed April 9, 2015.

⁶“Vermelho Park” had become a garbage dump, reduced to rubble and ashes by the September 2012 fire. Until this time, the place was used by children as a playing area.

funds and material resources)⁷; (4) T-shirt sales of Moinho Vivo. The public forums became the main convergence space for the community, connecting various political and cultural actors, internal and external to the community. Project *Comboio* is still ongoing until this date.

Comboio / Favela Moinho / 31st Bienal de São Paulo

The title of the 31st Bienal de São Paulo, “How to (...) things that don’t exist”, is a poetic invocation of art’s capacities, its ability to reflect and act upon life, power and belief⁸. The curatorial text conjures up a state of turn in the contemporary condition and an attempt to find a way out of established parameters in order to give space to complexity and flexibility, without shying away from conflict and confrontation⁹. The emphasis is on process and collaborative action between individual and groups, on relationships that should continue and develop throughout, moving in the opposite direction to the closure (and imprisonment) of the biennial in itself.

The curatorial intention in developing a collaboration between *Comboio* and the community of Favela Moinho in the context of the 31st Bienal de São Paulo focuses on exploring art’s ability to interfere in different contexts. As part of the 31st Bienal de São Paulo, *Comboio* and Moinho Vivo developed a series of cultural and educational public workshops, from September to November, 2014¹⁰, whose activities were: sidewalk drawing workshop, planting and gardening workshop, electrical workshop, toy workshop, urban furniture workshop and a concert. In terms of presence in the exhibition

context, after meetings between curators, artists and community to discuss whether and how to present materials relating to the project, it was decided that relevant phrases and slogans related to the community’s struggle would be shown on a large glass panel in the Cicillo Matarazzo Pavilion at Ibirapuera Park, which houses the Bienal. The material shown was assembled by artists and community together.



Pictures 4 and 5 – Images of the workshops occurred at Favela Moinho and the exhibition space. Source: <https://m.flickr.com/#/photos/bienalsaopaulo/15405564824/>, accessed on 09-04-2015.

⁷On December, 2013 the Movimento Moinho Vive and the *Comboio* made an independent campaign to collect resources (materials, tools and money) to build the “Vermelhão Park”.

⁸<http://www.31bienal.org.br/en/information/766>, accessed April 9, 2015.

⁹“This is not a Bienal built on art and objects, but on people working with people on projects, on collaborations between individuals and groups, on relationships that should continue and develop throughout and, perhaps, even after the 31st Bienal is over. While a small group of people might be the initiators, the stress of the 31st Bienal is on all those who will be in contact with the project and make use of it, and on what the encounters with the projects and the event as a whole will create. The openness of the process needs to be understood in terms of a process of learning: an educational exchange that is established throughout and on each level and therefore unresolved and exploratory”. The curatorial text can be accessed at: <http://www.31bienal.org.br/en/information/766>, accessed April 9, 2015.

¹⁰ The activities were: sidewalk drawing workshop, planting and gardening workshop, electrical workshop, toy workshop, urban furniture workshop and a concert at Favela Moinho.

Social perspectives in Brazilian art: a “rearguard art”, according to Mário Pedrosa

The emergence of political consciousness in the Brazilian art context dates back to the 1920s and 30s. Mário Pedrosa (1900–1981) was one of the most important contributors for Brazilian social history of

art¹¹, and his work can still help us think through the preoccupations with the social dimension of art that, since the 2000, have given rise to new strategies in the intersection between art and political activism in Brazil¹².

Mário Pedrosa argues that art and politics are inseparable, and art will always be revolutionary for as long as it is socially engaged and committed to raising awareness and communicating with all, without becoming a means in the hands of the state: an art of combat, not propaganda. He distinguishes between "works with immediate aesthetic purpose", which express a class consciousness that arises out of "the feeling of solidarity in misfortune and so its first expression necessarily takes a defensive way", and the "experimental exercise of freedom" – a favorite expression of Pedrosa's, which first emerges in the mid-1960s and then follows him throughout his life –, an art proposal that refuses to become a merchandise and takes place in the form of acts, gestures and collective actions, ephemeral and environmental. These are the openings in the "autonomy of art"¹³ granted by the capitalist system: the "experimental exercise of freedom" is the minimal room for manoeuvre, to be preserved and enhanced, available for socially engaged artists in capitalism.

In the 70s, already worried about the encroachment of the entertainment industry in art, Pedrosa proposes political action as the only way to break the circle, creating new conditions for the emergence of a new man and the flourishing of a new art. It is up to "authentic artists", who distinguish themselves from the "silkworm" of mass production, to take up the defensive position of what

he calls "rearguard art"¹⁴. "*But where are the social and cultural conditions that allow these animals to continue to produce their silk and use of their natural gift in full freedom? How to preserve that silk in its original authenticity and how to distribute it without changing its intrinsic existence, how to give it and exchange it in a society with synthetic silk aplenty and carried away by the mass mobilizations and mass entertainment?*"¹⁵.

About possible uses of art (today)

Charles Esche¹⁶, one of the curators of the 31st Bienal de São Paulo, emphatically declared that if we live in scary times, we need scary concepts: the days of art for art's sake are gone – a useful art is necessary¹⁷. For him, the commons materialised in cultural institutions and the concomitant bankruptcy of the state create the opportunity for something like what Pedrosa referred to as "*experimental exercise of freedom*": the possibility of "harnessing" the permissiveness granted to art by bourgeois society in order to generalize the idea of collective ownership.

Almost half a century after Mário Pedrosa's early identification of one of the fundamental conditions of the transition from the modern to the contemporary – the shift from the exclusive focus on the artwork to the expanded focus on the artistic

¹⁴Lecture presented at the First Latin American Bienal de São Paulo Symposium, 3 / 11-17 / 12/1978. "Variations without a theme or the art of defense" is not a thesis, it is a proposition which I hope will be worthy of attention for future Latin American biennials. His disillusionment, until the end of life, with the sterilization of art in consumer society would be a recurring theme in his late criticism.

¹⁵Pedrosa, Mario (2007, pp. 113).

¹⁶Charles Esche is Director of van Abbemuseum, Eindhoven and Editorial Director of Afterall Journal and Books based at Central St. Martins College of Art and Design, University of the Arts, London. In the last years, he has focused on analysing the narratives of the museum collection and investigating the cultural and political history of exhibition making. He has (co)curated the following international exhibitions since 2002: It doesn't always have to be beautiful, unless it's beautiful, National Art Gallery of Kosovo, Prishtinë, 2012; Strange and Close, CAPC, Bordeaux, 2011 both with Galit Eilat; 5th U3 triennial, Ljubljana, 2010; 2nd and 3rd Riwaq Biennale, Ramallah, Palestine, 2007–9 with Reem Fadda and Khalil Rabah; the 9th Istanbul Biennial 2005 with Vasif Kortun, Esra Sarigedik Öktem and November Paynter and the Gwangju Biennale 2002 in Korea with Hou Hanru. From 2000–2003 he was Director of the now defunct Rooseum Center for Contemporary Art, Malmö. He writes extensively for journals and publications. <http://cimam.org/charles-esche/>, accessed April 9, 2015.

¹⁷<http://www.publico.pt/culturaipsilon/noticia/instrumentalizar-a-arte-sim-diz-charles-esche-vivemos-tempos-assustadores-precisamos-de-conceitos-assustadores-1680141>, accessed April 9, 2015.

¹¹Mário Pedrosa was a journalist, professor, art critic, curator, writer, collaborator of the Bienal de São Paulo Foundation and MAM-RJ (Rio de Janeiro Museum of Modern Art), socialist activist and leader. He opened a way for Trotsky's thought in Brazil and, symbolically, signed the first membership card of the Workers' Party, in 1980, one year before his death.

¹²The right to the city, housing rights and a new discussion about the meaning of the public and the private constitute the common matrix for the following ongoing actions in Brazil: #ocupeestelita, Recife / PE; Occupy Parque Augusta, São Paulo / SP; Occupy Cais Mauá, Porto Alegre / RS; Vila Itororó, em São Paulo / SP.

¹³During his trajectory, Mário Pedrosa did not interpret the autonomy of art in the same way. In his early criticism, "proletarian art" and "utilitarian art" were used as terms of praise in relation to Kathe Kollwitz's work, in his first published piece of criticism, "Social trends of art and Kathe Kollwitz," of 1933. Later, Pedrosa will become wary of the possible confusion between "proletarian art" and socialist realism, and will enhance its meaning to include the constant and updated renewal of means of expression and form.

action –, Charles Esche takes up the idea of the opening provided by the autonomy of art to think it in relation to the institutional context. Esche argues that the art institutions can and should take on the role of agents in the reinvention of a decaying state, in the necessary actions of translation for new surfaces. Esche's argument is thus quite similar to Mário Pedrosa's. According to both, the main question can be summarized in two points: the first one is the instrumentalization of art as a possible use from its own autonomy; the second one is that pushing art beyond an exclusively aesthetic scope can produce an impulse towards social construction, and thus the possibility of some kind of rupture/revolution into the system. "*If being creative, in the capitalist sense, is to imagine what does not exist for the creation of 'the new', why can art not imagine society?*"¹⁸

The social practice of art as a political issue has historical antecedents and certainly there is a clear threshold between the art as a tool for socialization of society and the art as a tool for political propaganda¹⁹. In general, what encourages the socially engaged artists today are not the policies generated by governments or institutions, but rather perceived demands that emerge from their own activist practice. There is a sense of urgency, the immediacy in these practices that are guided by a common matrix for citizenship education (or "education through art," according to Mário Pedrosa). The scale of operation is 1:1, including the important discussing of the actual meaning of the "public" in contemporary art and social theory?²⁰. Here art plays a functional role within structures of thought, where the language is not just used in a symbolic way to present proposals, and where the aesthetic "function" is disabled in the foreground for the activation of function "usefulness".

¹⁸ Idem.

¹⁹ Mário Pedrosa, who remained a Marxist and close to Trotskyism throughout his life, opposed socialist realism and always advocated full freedom of artistic production. These positions are repeated mainly in his writings in the *Vanguarda Socialista* (Socialist Vanguard) newspaper. *Vanguarda Socialista* was a weekly newspaper founded by Pedrosa which circulated from 1945 to 1948 in Rio de Janeiro. The newspaper brought together socialist intellectuals, mostly Trotskyists and dissidents from the Communist Party; it was not related to any political party and aimed to develop a critique of work and construction of the revolutionary movement in opposition to the guidelines issued by the Stalinist leadership in the Soviet Union.

²⁰ About this discussion: Rodrigo Nunes, "Towards a Politics of Counterpimping" *Revista MESA*, May, 2015. <http://institutomesa.org/revista-mesa/>, accessed April 9, 2015.

Yes, I am aware that the concept of instrumentalization of art sounds terrible for those who advocate that art is an autonomous field and the arguments that is just because of the potential of the inoperative that makes it liberating. Nevertheless, I am not advocating the end of the autonomy of art: on the contrary, I believe that the use of art in specific practices is one of the transgressive possibilities opened to art by its very autonomy. I propose that rather than debating if artistic practices can or cannot be instrumentalized (indeed, the proliferation of these actions is a concrete proof of this possibility), we discuss the uses of art today. If in Mário Pedrosa's time his thoughts turned to the artistic tensions between the symbolic and the useful, nowadays, when the social practice of art is consolidated, the researches move on to discuss possibilities of action.

For now, I will not dwell on terminological discussions about art as a social practice²¹, and neither will I reduce it to "arte útil" [*useful art*]. If, as the Cuban artist Tania Bruguera asserts, that we can already put Duchamp's urinal back in the bathroom, it is also important not to forget that this possible return does not invalidate the achievements of his previous actions. Both possibilities for the "urinal" can and should co-exist. Regarding the concept of "useful art", I would like to argue here against the claim that all actions that fall under this concept are automatically anti-capitalist.

We can talk about escape attempts, ruptures and questioning the capitalist system, but no action taken on its own is anticapitalist *per se*. Artistic social practices are possible precisely because of the "gap" in the existing system itself: they negotiate tactical and strategic exchanges in it. Even though the "value" of these works does not lie in their marketable materiality in terms of the mainstream art system, it is never the case that they exist outside relations that can either make them directly profitable or instrumental for capitalistic interests. The symbolic economies of art and activism in this context can be explored from the concepts of escapology and gaming, launched by Wright (2014)²².

²¹ Many terms have been proposed to refer to works of art as social practice. Among them: "conversational art" (Homi K. Bhabha), "dialogical aesthetics" (Grant Kester), "new genre public art" (Suzanne Lacy), "new institutionalism" (Claire Doherty), "connective aesthetics" (Suzy Gablik), "participatory art" (Claire Bishop) etc. On this discussion see: Exhibition of Social Intervention "Culture in Action", 1993. Joshua Decker, Helmut Draxler and other authors *Exhibition Histories Afterall*, Central Saint Martins, University of the Arts London, 2014.

²² Wright (2014)

Escapology, in short, is the theory and practice of suspending the operations of all these mechanisms of capture. *"The verb 'escape' is usually thought to derive from the Vulgar Latin excapare, from ex- ('out') + capio ('capture'). It may well be, however, that it comes from the Late Latin ex cappa, in reference not to capture at all but to a 'cape' or cloak which remains behind even as the living body which it had clad has slipped away"*²³. Through the concept of gaming, Wright (2014, pp. 30) launches the questions: *"is there anything outside gaming? Certainly there are different ways of gaming, but is there anything beyond gaming? Is playing the spoilsport not also a game?"* Art as social practice can be understood as the rearguard art of resistance, as Pedrosa already described it in 1978, but it still is an action of the capitalist system. *"Usership is not beyond gaming; indeed, it's just gaming – but playing for real"*²⁴.

Returning to the configuration Comboio / Favela Moinho at the 31st Bienal de São Paulo

The collaboration among projects that have different temporalities generates a clash between the long and the short term. Favela Moinho has a history before, during and after project *Comboio*. In turn, *Comboio* is a long-term project in relation to the Bienal and biennial models in general. The insertion of the discussion of an artistic social practice in an institutional context such as a biennial can be an accelerationist "kick" to the internal dynamics of an ongoing collective action by binding the different temporalities into a single, cohabited time. This cohabited time is what Bruno Latour would call "the great Complicator"²⁵, where the shared democratic space is understood as time publicly in common, as opposed to independent time frames.

In the structural context of the biennial exhibition model, the criteria for the discussion of what to present of artistic social practice is not itself aesthetic. It is rather a matter of what and how to convey the density of information of an artistic social practice taking place in a space / time outside

the institution. Taking the distinction proposed by Draxler (2014, pp. 10) between two particular categories of artistic practices – the exhibitionary and the discursive²⁶ – Comboio / Favela Moinho is a discursive action communicating a new challenge for insertion of these practices at the institutional level.

The insertion of artistic social practices in institutional spheres is one of the possible "uses of the institution" that expand its ability to function as a platform for critical thinking and social change. Art can and should go beyond the spaces traditionally ascribed to it, be they the studio, the gallery, the museum or alternative spaces. On the other hand, there is no way of saying in advance whether the "kicks" involved in bringing artistic social practices into institutional settings have for the practice and the community itself point forward or backwards; such mediations are not good or bad *per se*, but should be discussed case by case. ? On the other hand, there is no way of saying in advance whether the "kicks" involved in bringing artistic social practices into institutional settings have, for the practice and the community itself point of view, advantages or drawbacks.

²³ Wright (2014, pp. 23–24)

²⁴ Wright (2014, pp. 32).

²⁵ In order to move beyond the modern term of a reflexive subject – a concept for which the transition between passive and active participants in art is difficult to assess – it is necessary to consider the issue of time. More specifically, how public time is framed in order that a space of co-production can emerge. Latour, Bruno. *"From realpolitik to dingpolitik or how to make thing public"*. Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2005.

²⁶ "The exhibitionary includes ways of arranging and presenting objects or displaying information; ways of addressing, assembling and guiding people; and ways of interacting symbolically with those objects of information via conversation, education, marketing or critique, in which the discursive has become a means of intervening into the exhibitionary situation through voiced debates and targeted questioning". Decker, J.; Draxler, H and other authors (2014, pp. 10).

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