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## The Brazilian Experience—Puzzling Morality and the Effusive Body (Part 1)

By Cristiane Bouger



Daniel Fagundes, *Existe alguma possibilidade ética que não acene ao totalitarismo?* (Is there any ethical possibility which will not wave to totalitarism?), 2008. Performance view, VERBO 2008. Photo by Ding Musa.

When asked about her perspective on performance, the independent curator Daniela Labra stated with simultaneous confidence and perplexity: “Brazilians are performative. We deal with the body in a libertarian way, but we are also impregnated with moralisms.” The paradox raised by Labra can be identified in almost every aspect of Brazilian culture and social behavior. Nevertheless, her statement also addresses a poignant criticism to the conservatism of art institutions.

Labra has been working as a researcher and curator of performance works since 2004. In 2011 she conceived the Festival Performance Arte Brasil at the Museu de Arte Moderna do Rio de Janeiro—MAM RJ. The six-day festival received a grant from FUNARTE/MinC (The National Foundation for the Arts/Ministry of Culture) in the amount of approximately USD 125, 000. A curatorial team formed by professionals from different

regions of the country composed the festival program, which presented the work of more than forty artists and art collectives.

According to Labra, there is a lot of work to be done before Brazilian artists working in performance could benefit from a professional art market. She defines the institutional reception of performance as precarious. In her analysis, curators and artists face a lot of institutional conservatism, bureaucracy and nepotism, which are aggravated by a lack of understanding of this practice by those who work in the museums. “In Brazil, performance production is still considered underground,” she states.



Daniel Toledo with Ana Hupe, *Veste Nu*, 2011. Performance view, Festival Performance Arte Brasil, Rio de Janeiro. Photo by Julio Callado.

Her perspective evokes, for instance, the polemic around Márcia X in 2006. The first performances by Márcia X (1959-2005) date back to the 1980s, but it was *Desenhando com Terços* (2000-2003) that became perhaps her most emblematic work. Performing in a white gown, Márcia X silently and repetitively connected white rosaries, shaping them in the form of phalluses on the floor of a room or gallery. The performance duration varied from three to six hours, in accordance with the size of the space in which the work was performed.

In 2006, an image showing four rosaries shaping the form of two crossed phalluses was part of the collective show “*Erótica—Os Sentidos da Arte*” presented by Centro Cultural Banco do Brasil—CCBB in São Paulo. When the same exhibition was presented in Rio de Janeiro, members from Catholic groups claimed the work was offensive and urged CCBB to remove it from the exhibition. CCBB, the cultural institution of Banco do Brasil (Brazil’s Federal Bank), ceded to pressure.

Notwithstanding the censorship resulted in counter-protests, the expected opening of the exhibition in Brasília was canceled after the incident in Rio. The anachronism implied in the decision of censoring Márcia X’s work caused to many artists a bitter perplexity, and perhaps, a reminiscence of the censorship



experienced during the years under dictatorship (1964–1985).



Márcia X, *Desenhando com Terços*, 2000. Installation view, Casa de Petrópolis, Instituto de Cultura. Photo by Vicente de Mello.

Performer and curator Marco Paulo Rolla uses nudity to nullify the economic and social status that clothes inscribe over the body. He points out another variant to the conservatism equation: “Some public art institutions are more concerned with the schools visiting the museums than to the art that is presented there. I cannot be naked in my work because the school will be visiting the museum. So, it is the school who defines my work and what I cannot do.”

If the Brazilian scenario seems not to be so enthusiastic, do not let this perspective fool you. The concomitant aspect in this paradox reveals that the institutions in the country have been also showing signs of maturity since the last decade or so.

In the last years, the Bienal Internacional de São Paulo included in their program performance works such as *A Bondade de Estranhos* (2008), by Maurício Ianês; and *Divisor* (1968/2010), by Lygia Pape (1927-2004).

In the south of the country, Luiz Ernesto Meyer Pereira, Director of the Bienal Internacional de Curitiba, affirms that in 2013 performance will be included in the biennial program, receiving the same visibility of works created in more traditional mediums. For the performance’s program curatorship, artist and curator Fernando Ribeiro was invited to join the team.

Along with Patrícia Valverde, Ribeiro also co-curates the performance event p.ARTE at Bicicletaria Cultural in Curitiba. The independent venue is a hybrid bike repair shop and cultural space run by Valverde and the

visual artist Fernando Rosembaum.

In Florianópolis, the visual artist Yiftah Peled runs Contemporão Espaço de Performance, a garage studio in which exhibitions and performance works have been presented in a non-regular program since 2009.

Festival Panorama founded in 1992 in Rio de Janeiro, was originally conceived as a dance festival. Currently directed by Nayse Lopez, Eduardo Bonito and Catarina Saraiva, the festival has expanded its program to incorporate interdisciplinary works. In 2012, Panorama Festival partnered with the Escola de Artes Visuais do Parque Lage to commission the presentation of happenings and performance works, including the piece *Big Bang Boom* by choreographer and performer Michelle Moura.

Events such as Performance Presente Futuro at Oi Futuro in Rio de Janeiro from 2008 to 2010, curated by Daniela Labra, conceived as an interdisciplinary platform dedicated to research the cross-boundary between performance and technological/scientific resources; Encontros de Arte e Gastronomia at MAM SP in São Paulo in 2012, curated by Felipe Chaimovich and Laurent Suaudeau, proposed to pair visual artists and cuisine chefs; and Performa Paço at Paço das Artes in São Paulo in 2011, which was conceived by Priscila Arantes and curated by Lucio Agra around the theme “extreme actions,” constitute important investigations and curatorial approaches that reflect the renovated interest for performance in a Brazilian context.





Michelle Moura, *Big Bang Boom*, 2012. Performance view, EAV - Parque Lage, Rio de Janeiro, during Panorama Festival 2012. Photo by Inti Briones.

Back in the late 1990s in Belo Horizonte, Marco Paulo Rolla felt the performance field was lacking vigor. According to Rolla, there was a lot of resistance against performance, as institutions feared this practice for not having much control over it. So in 2003, Rolla founded the event *Manifestação Internacional da Performance – MIP* along with Marcos Hill and CEIA – Centro de Experimentação e Informação de Arte.

MIP constitutes a platform to present performance works, reflect upon current productions, and document work. A book is published after each edition of the event and distributed in print and online. The second edition of MIP occurred in 2009 and presented the work of more than 60 artists from different parts of the world.

Galeria Vermelho presented the annual performance festival *VERBO* in São Paulo from 2005 to 2011. According to curator Marcos Gallon, in those years, around 400 performances were presented at Vermelho. In 2012 the festival format was extinguished, and performance was incorporated on the gallery schedule of exhibitions throughout the year.

Based on the importance performance has achieved in the current context, Gallon affirms that the idea of sustaining a separate festival for this art form seemed a paternalist choice. According to Gallon, “there are no more reasons to separate performance from the other mediums.”



Left to right: Cris Bierrenbach *Comida*, 2008. Performance view, VERBO 2008. Guilherme Peters, *Marcando Território*, 2010. Performance at VERBO 2010. Photo by Ding Musa.

Considering institutional art collections, the Museu de Arte Moderna de São Paulo was the first museum in Brazil to acquire an artwork based on a scripted action. Laura Lima’s piece *Quadris de homem=carne/mulher=carne* (1995) was included in the MAM SP collection in 2000. In 2006, Inhotim – Instituto de Arte Contemporânea e Jardim Botânico, in Brumadinho/Minas Gerais, acquired *Dopada* (1997), among other works by Lima.

Since the mid-nineties, Laura Lima has rejected the foreign term “performance,” which she considers inadequate to surrogate the concepts of her work. The understanding of carnality and flesh as simply matter is a fundamental aspect of her production, in which people and animals are deliberately employed. This option confers to the work what the artist calls “a brutal fragility,” and the artworks are sold to the institutions under very specific demands scripted by the artist.



Laura Lima, *Marra*, 1996. From the series *Homem=carne/Mulher=carne*. Photo by Eduardo Eckenfels, Inhotim, Belo Horizonte/MG.

The 2012 retrospective of Lygia Clark (1920-1988) at Itaú Cultural in São Paulo included some of the artist's participatory propositions. *Rede de Elásticos* and *O Corpo Coletivo* are among the works visitors could experience. The iconic proposition *Baba Antropofágica* (Cannibalistic Drool), first proposed by Lygia Clark to her students at the Sorbonne in Paris in 1973, was also recently reenacted by the Clark Art Center - CAC, in Rio de Janeiro, with the participation of musician Jards Macalé. In the experience, Macalé lies down on the floor while the other participants, carrying spools of cotton thread in their mouths, pull the threads with expelled drool and place them over the body on the floor, creating a kind of connective net among the participants. The attention that has been given to the reconstruction of Clark's propositions, including the recreation of *Livro-Obra* (1983), with its manipulable structures on a free iPad application, also signalizes a significant progress for the preservation of Brazilian cultural legacy on the field.

This month, MAM RJ opened the anticipated exhibition "Arquivo X/X-Files," curated by Beatriz Lemos. Engaging with the conundrums of how to archive or exhibit performances, as well as in the process of donating Márcia X's works to MAM RJ, Lemos and the museum staff developed an extensive research on the artist's performance and visual art production archives since the early eighties. The exhibition, part of a larger

project that included the publishing of a book on X's production and the restoration of some of her pieces, will be on view until April 2013.



Marco Paulo Rolla with chef Henrique Fogaça, *O Esmagamento Sensível*, 2012. Performance view, Museu

de Arte Moderna, São Paulo. Photo by Edouard Fraipont.

Independent efforts to document and map the works developed in Brazil have been significant: in 2007 artist and researcher Zmário mapped the performance scene in Salvador; in 2008 the visual artist Newton Goto launched Circuito Compartilhados, a 35-DVD collection, the result of extensive research on the production of independent video art and video performance in Brazil since the seventies. In 2010, the art critic Paulo Reis curated the exhibition “O Corpo na Cidade - Performance em Curitiba,” mapping this practice in the city since the early 1970s.

The independent scene is also acquiring more visibility and public funds. With grants elaborated by the Ministry of Culture and FUNARTE based on artists’ participation, the inclusion of interdisciplinary arts in the public programs and the creation of grants focusing on art research have been replacing or expanding old models and obsolete art categories. An increasing number of independent artists have become proponents and facilitators of events related to performance.

Art collectives such as Corpos Informáticos, Grupo Empreza, Couve-Flor, ES3, Coletivo Filé de Peixe, Grupo de Interferência Ambiental – GIA, and e/ou (Curitiba) have developed a diversity of discourses and extended practices that incorporate interventions, happenings, actions, performance, technology, and interdisciplinary discourse permeating theater, visual arts and contemporary dance. The challenge for artists in Brazil remains the uncertainty of the continuity of cultural programs. Federal, state, and municipal grants tend to suffer disruption or changes according to the politicians in office. Brazil has not developed a culture of art philanthropy. The available funds are usually provided through competitive grants and commissions directly related to the cultural marketing departments of private corporations (tax-deductible sponsorship), or by federal sponsorship concealed for art projects with budgets and creative standards previously approved by the Ministry of Culture. Given the extent of the country and its geographical and socio-economical diversity, to trace a comprehensive picture of Brazil is a challenging task.

Brazil is in a frank transition. Advancements can be seen in many of the structures related to its art production, but the cumbersome aspects of stagnating models based on old behaviors and an intimidating bureaucracy are still aspects to be faced and overcome.





Rose Akras and Rob Visser, *Movement with a rest product: space*, 2010. Performance view, VERBO 2010. Photo by Rafael Cañas.

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