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## LEARNINGS FROM SÃO PAULO

*This is the story of a five-day exploration of São Paulo. Or rather, a declaration of love for this gigantic, all-consuming metropolis and its equally huge and greedy art institutes and cultural centres.*

By Maxine Kopsa

This story could be prefaced and proven by my present obsessive morning behaviour. I've wasted (wasted?) four hours trawling the net for more. More São Paulo or more precisely more Brazil, as best I can, via its sound.

If I could make these words melt into music, then I would. And I'd put on Deize Tigrana for you. I play her now, whatever I can find from MySpace and iTunes, as I write. Tigrana sings (bellows) about her cheating husband, her own commendable work ethic and anal sex. That is, I'm *told* she's singing about all of this, because even though my gut tells me I can, I can't understand her silky, chalky, jagged Brazilian Portuguese.

The virile and vital sounding Baile Funk of people like Deize Tigrana is perhaps the lawful (unlawful?) heir to musical and cultural forerunners such as the 1950s Bossa Nova style and the 1960s and 70s *Tropicália* movement. And if so, it continues a Brazilian tradition of attempted political and social unification very much grounded in the present, though also connected to the country's history of folklore.



Daniela Dacorso, from the *To-Joma* series, Nederlands Folomuseum Rotterdam



Dias & Riedweg, *Funk Staden*, 2007, Video installation, 14'32" loop, courtesy Galeria Vermelho, São Paulo

### CULTURAL CANNIBALISM

Politics, music, aesthetics and national identity are inextricably allied in Brazil. You see it on the streets, you hear it in the music, you digest it in the food. At least you do in São Paulo. São Paulo, the gigantic, hectic, noisy, concrete cultural capital of Brazil where people work – as opposed to Rio, where people play. São Paulo is without a doubt a city that moves, dynamically, and in many directions at once. Even as a superficial visitor, you get a sense that the differences amidst people, sounds, foods are not denied but allowed to exist simultaneously. This melting together of cultures does not form a melting pot (as might be assumed) but something other, something more organic? Natural? Human?

The concept of anthropophagy is a crucial factor here. Like *Tropicália*, it too is unavoidable when discussing the culture of Brazil. The *Manifesto Antropófago* (published in 1928), literally 'cannibalist manifesto', was, in short, based on the idea of cultural cannibalism. The manifesto's author, the Brazilian poet Oswald de Andrade, promoted the new 'technologized barbarian' man, pinpointing and promoting Brazil's tendency to swallow up but continue to use diverse sources. Anthropophagy therefore sets up a working and viable relationship with Brazil's colonial past that incorporates (digests and regurgitates) Latin American and European influences. And this is precisely what is to be felt, still today.

The cultural institutions in São Paulo have one common trait: their desire to be all-embracing – from Itaú Cultural's vast cultural programmes, an initiative of Itaú, one of the country's largest banks, to the sprawling Cultural Center Sesc Pompéia, one of many culture slash health centres with free access to countless events, libraries, sports facilities, and restaurants, via commercial galleries like Galeria Vermelho and Fortes Vilaça to the jaw-dropping Centro Cultural São Paulo (CCSP) and Paço das Artes (Palace of Arts). The drive to map, to archive, the need for overview seems to compel these ambitious cultural institutions to continuously grapple with the sheer immensity of their own country. Their determination to include North, South, East and West leads them to construct networks as a work methodology, for example of semi-mobile local curators who report back on activities in various areas (curatorial systems in place at Itaú and Paço das Artes) or national open call exhibitions. This form of networking or 'social engagement' has

a strong sense of *service* at its core. 'Service' in terms of the support of communication networks, the spread of information, the establishment of community projects. 'Service', therefore, with a sense of urgency or necessity.

All cultural institutions in Brazil are private. This means that there are no (or very few) government-supported initiatives. Instead, there is a law in place, the so called 'Lei Rouanet', which awards substantial tax breaks to approved companies who wish to invest in approved cultural activity. Hence not only Banco Itaú's but also Banco do Brasil's extensive cultural programmes (Itaú alone pumps about 38 million dollars into their exhibition programmes each year).

### NON-POLITICAL

You may see the problem: approval on both sides is required. So support tends to go to the better-known cultural producers, apparently. Alternatives do exist. An ongoing programme like 'pathways' or in Portuguese, '*Rumos*', set up by Itaú Cultural doesn't only support the already supported – the opposite in fact. This long-term, editioned project (each edition lasting two years), involves sets or teams of appointed curators, younger curators headed up by the more established, who reconnoitre over an extended period, write reports on what is going on culturally in various parts of the country and ultimately present a selection in the form of exhibitions. This kind of cultural mapping eventually, for the select few, leads to some notoriety. But one has to wonder, without any kind of funding going directly to individual artists – only to institutions – and very little or none to production costs, and without proper public art schools (there are two private academies of note, though very both very costly) how artists manage to survive at all. It's no wonder that many, according to Pieter Tjabbes from the São Paulo based cultural agency, Art Unlimited, generally come from wealthier families.

Perhaps the non-political tendency in contemporary Brazilian art is coupled to this. According to one of the chief curators at Itaú, Paulo Sérgio Duarte, Brazilian art over the past twenty years has moved from rural to urban concerns with a tendency towards 'private, existential views on the relationship between art and life'. This is due, the seemingly wise and considered Duarte tells us, to 'a general deception in the Left'. Since its arrival back onto the political scene, 'many of the promised transformations didn't happen and there is still a high degree

of corruption'. A phrase exists, he says, that sums up this political tiredness; in response to heavy-handed concerns, a 'Paulista' might shrug their shoulders and simply say: 'Give me a break.'

Give me a break is hardly the attitude Martin Grossman, director of the Centre Cultural São Paulo (CCSP), exudes. More like 'Give me more.' Grossman is enthusiastic, runs rather than walks us through his impressive 50,000 square metre cultural centre, describing how he has recently further melted down the divisions, both physical and figurative, between departments (music, art, theatre, dance, cinema, libraries...) and rearranged the centre's offices to house everyone together in one large open space. There is a feeling indeed of togetherness in the building, of expansive potential and the mixing of disciplines, what with its auditoriums, sound archives, libraries, exhibitions spaces all seamlessly connected by wide ramps, open entrances and glass walls. 'The CCSP opened in 1982, after its plans had been revised when São Paulo's cultural secretary of the time had, in 1978, gone to Paris and seen the Pompidou,' Grossman explains. 'However, its architects, Luiz Benedito Telles and Eurico Prado Lopes, never received the attention they deserved. In fact, for many they are still completely unknown.' The CCSP was commissioned and completed during Brazil's military rule (1964-85), hence a baby of the Right, so to speak, making it 'difficult' for many advocates of the Left to acknowledge the building's architectural quality. 'It's not credited in history,' Grossman tells us, as we stand in one of the main spaces termed the arena that essentially feels like a gigantic hallway. He points to a far corner where we can spot two couches: 'On Saturdays there are 30-minute free psychoanalysis sessions here.' And no, this isn't an artist's project, this is real life, true public service.

#### RELATIONAL ARCHITECTURE

That a building can reflect the politics of its time is nothing new. But that it actually have a shifting, maybe even fickle *relationship* with its time is remarkable. CCSP wasn't the only institution that reflected its origins. Paço das Artes, founded in 1970 and associated with the State Department of Culture of São Paulo, conveys its story even more blatantly. Curator Fernando Oliva tells of how midway through the project construction was halted, supposedly for fear of creating a potential meeting ground for students. On the university campus, Paço das Artes was

originally intended to be a large-scale multi purpose centre; again, open and fluid in terms of design and content. Presently it is only about half of what it was intended to be. In fact, a fair bit of the presentation space was originally meant to be a lobby or reception area. Oliva takes us through the rest of the building, much of it an abandoned concrete structure, some of it at times, when finances allow, in use for outdoor performances or exhibitions. There is something quite moving about standing in the middle of a modern ruin, one partially in use, a ghost of what it was supposed to be. It is rare to witness ideology and ensuing strife made so concrete. Oliva, however, is not overly sentimental in his telling of the institution's troubled history. As with others we meet, there's a resigned but refreshing manner about his no-nonsense approach. I'm reminded of what Ivo Mesquita, curator of the Pinacoteca and chief curator of the last São Paulo Bienal, said about his fellow countrymen: 'The ability to parody others as well as ourselves separates us from the tragic sensibility of our Hispanic neighbours.' This is the same Ivo Mesquita who, during drinks before yet another mouth-watering meat filled dinner, dashed my romantic views of politics infesting architecture. According to him, Paço das Artes's architecture was not arrested mid-construction due to political ideology; it was, he claimed, a question of economics - they had simply run out of cash.

#### SEXY COMMUNITY CENTRES

No matter the exact nature of Paço das Artes, the manner in which its history is debated by the locals is in itself an interesting given, showing on the one hand pragmatic scepticism of recent mythology and on the other the potential for contemporary storytelling. Speaking in broad, sweeping terms, São Paulo seemed full of stories and the Paulistas seemed especially social people (even the gallerists were lovely). Could their unbelievably charming and hospitable manner also be connected somehow to the drive to map their own culture and archive their own history? To their continuous digestion and re-digestion of their own identity? To the building of community centres that are welcoming meetings, debates, cultural exchanges as well as didactic services?

Without a doubt, Paulista society is mirrored in the structures of Paulista cultural institutions. After all, every society inherits the cultural institutions it deserves. But the multi-functional institutions we witnessed on our trip

Centro Cultural São Paulo, photo Maxine Kopsa



Centro Cultural SESC Pompéia, photo Maxine Kopsa



made me re-think our own approach to institutions: Why don't we have exciting, all encompassing, all ranging, multi-levelled, open-ended houses for cross/multi-disciplinary exchange? Why does 'community centre' mean something not-quite-that-sexy in our country? Is our proven affection for disciplinary focus not something far too old-fashioned? This thought made me recall what someone said to me at dinner one evening. I had asked her if it was really true there weren't any art academies in São Paulo, that if one wanted to study art one went to a regular university and mixed studio practice in with other subjects. And she answered yes. I started to explain to her the worth of 'our' system and I remember she just looked at me blankly. Finally she said, 'But isn't your system far more conventional than ours?'

Deize Tigrone's still swinging hard in the background when I get the following serendipitous tweet. The Museum of Modern Art says, 'We can't just be about art anymore... Museums are the new community centers.' (<http://tr.im/hyAI>)

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