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Technophagic Emergence

Creative and Critical Trends of Digital Culture.BR

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Brazilian production in the field of digital culture indicates an emerging technophagic tendency, a process that devours and grinds technology and which is mediated by a critical, creative use of the media. Such tendency appears in alternative economic models, artistic practices that promote other actions, and pirate systems devoted to collective uses of telecommunications.

Technophagy is not a movement, but a conceptualization that I've developed to refer to operations that mix tradition and innovation, unusual arrangements between scientific knowledge and artisanal lore, and micro-political actions on the appropriation of technologies. That tendency can be an initial version of a political and aesthetic practice that operates by means of the combination and the remodeling of equipment, the revalidation of the notions of hi and low tech, and the production of devices capable of promoting other forms of creation. Its context is the globalization and the process of digitizing culture at all levels.

The intensity of this process in Brazil is changing not only the economic and geopolitical status of the country in the world, but also the forms of relation with technological devices, including the social profile of those who have access to the Internet. Nowadays, this social profile is mainly constituted by lower-middle and lower classes (52%) based at LAN houses located in the suburbs and in slums (Ibope 2009, Brazilian Internet Steering Committee 2010; p. 244, Lemos and Martini 2009).

The social profile of access to Information and Communication Technologies was not the only thing that has changed a lot in recent years. The forms of production and diffusion of culture have also changed dramatically. These novelties led to several independent actions, such as Overmundo and Casa da Cultura Digital, which are projects with the aim of establishing circuits to spread the cultural production. In addition, they led to the emergence of temporary networks devoted to the creation of devices that can generate another creative actions proposing new economic models.

It's worth mentioning the Circuito Fora do Eixo, a network of small initiatives in the music industry and devoted to the exchange of technology, conceived in 2005 by cultural producers from cities located outside the mainstream circuit of the Brazilian cultural economy, i.e., outside the Rio de Janeiro-São Paulo circuit. The network grew and today it has nodes all over the country, being responsible for many festivals, including international initiatives like the Grito Rock South América. In their own words: "It proved to be possible to produce in large scale in a self-sustaining chain, in direct contact with producers from other states through a network of information based in small units in favor of large stocks."

This wave of new production models occurs in the context of a remarkable growth in the purchasing power. From 2003 through 2008 the income of Brazil's poorest population grew 72%, what made 18.5 million people leave the poverty line, while other 32 million became part of richer segments. The impact of these changes on consumption capacity is undeniable and has created new social profiles in the C and D classes. Experts now call them "impulsive consumers". (M. C. Neri 2010; Nova S/B and Ibope Intelligence 2009)

The perverse effects of this sudden growth on consumption capacity are waste and the fast disposal of technological goods. The counterpoint to that situation is represented by flowing groups, such as Gambiologia.net, Metareciclagem, Estúdio Livre, and LabOCA, that combine the recycling of equipment and the exploration of open code software. These collective initiatives as a whole are configuring a hi-low tech aesthetic, with great potential for ecological and political agency. Such new aesthetic can be observed in works by artists Fernando Rabelo, Mariana Manhães, and Lucas Bambozzi, among others.

Mobile Crash, by Bambozzi, for example, addresses the realm of consumption giving the audience the role of a player in the planned obsolescence game. It is an installation based on four interactive projections that react to the presence of visitors. A rhythmic sequence of short videos of technological devices being crushed by a hammer, divided in 12 levels of intensity, exacerbate in response to the intensity of the gestures of the audience. The more we move, the more quickly symbols of luxury are turned into e-trash. The result is an interactive process that stresses a hypothesis by anthropologist Néstor Canclini (2006) who observes that the new communication technologies have expanded the notion of citizenship, incorporating consumption practices to its exercise.

This relation between consumption related to ICTs and citizenship comprehends certain pirate strategies, such as the one adopted by the Nova Baixada TV, a "clandestine" cable TV net that had 30 thousand clients in Rio de Janeiro who paid a subscription 10% cheaper than that of the official cable TV operator and had access to all the channels available. It's worth

reminding that, besides being cheaper, the net reached places where the corporations couldn't go, using their technological resources. In addition, the Nova Baixada broadcast pirate copies of newly launched movies and had its own programming with channels specialized in funk music and sports. The net used to generate $ 300 thousand a month and had 40 employees. It was closed by the police recently, but new nets are emerging to take its place.

In spite of their different profiles, these several technophagic practices are a phenomenon directly related to the ongoing process of digitizing culture in Brazil. On the one hand, they are characterized as being in charge of an ironic reinvention of technology and, on the other hand, as having an agency capacity to spread alternative models of creative economy, thus proposing new circuits in the consumption market and, at the same time, bringing them into question.

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