

When electronic art was just art: The early days of new media in Brazil

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Abstract

This paper introduces an ongoing research into the study of early Brazilian electronic art at a time when the very distinction between this and other artistic forms was almost inexistent. By reviewing the demands of contemporary practitioners and contrasting it to the situation found by artists during the Brazilian dictatorship, we find that the reception of those early artworks was very much positive: not only did these find space within traditional artistic institutions but were also displayed alongside other emergent genres at the time, such as mail or video art. We conclude this paper pointing to the necessity of a historiographical revision regarding new media art in peripheral countries that did not possess the well-developed infrastructure seen in more developed economies. It is this precarity that, we believe, marked those early years and its close relationship with the larger art world.

Keywords

Media art histories; Brazilian art; digital art; new media art; Latin American art; Historiography; Social History of Art; art and technology; postwar art.

Introduction

Back in 2004 in São Paulo, a city that arguably hosts the most affluent and central artistic scene in Brazil, a meeting of local new media art critics, academics, supporters and artists discussed the future of that practice in the country. Its diagnosis, according to its participants, was bleak.

This meeting, which was the result of another mobilization via the internet, argued for a change in the government order that regulated the market for private sponsorship of the arts in the country. In this system, which companies offer money directly to cultural projects in return of tax breaks, their practice, labelled as “technological art”, was not explicitly detailed in the new government decree. Embodied in a petition signed by more than 600 individuals from all corners of the artistic field, their claim was focused on the “the immediate updating of the terms of *Portaria 01* from 02/19/2004, so that the professionals involved in the activities brought by the electronic era are not summarily and unjustly deprived of the benefits of a fundamental legislation” (Canetti, 2004 Author’s translation).

If we ignore the history of Brazilian artistic practices concerned with the uses of computational or other emerg-

ing technologies, one could be forgiven to believe that theirs was a relatively new and unknown genre. When reporting this mobilization, local newspapers, for example, only reinforced this view of a new and esoteric art (Abreu, 2004; Bloch, 2004). Moreover, given the assertiveness of the demands expressed by this group, it would be fair to assume that without this funding mechanism there would not be Digital, Technological, Electronic Art (or whatever label you may choose) in Brazil.

Yet, if we return to the roots of these practices in Brazilian culture, one may find a completely different scenario. Whereas in 2004 people were attempting to secure an exclusive space in the law in order to sustain their art, in the seventies and early eighties the very distinction between an ‘electronic’ art and a ‘traditional’ art would be alien to most in the field. This paper, the first steps into an ongoing research concerned with the development of digital or electronic art in Brazil, traces these early days when digital or electronic art was just and simply art.

Just (concrete) art

To comprehend the status of early Brazilian technological art (henceforth BTA), one needs to have two things considered: First, the position of its supporters and pioneers in the Brazilian artistic field at the time and, second, the political and economic contexts of Brazil’s turbulent and cruel dictatorship, which went from 1964 until 1985.

In relation to our first point, regarding positioning, here we are referring to the sociological literature interested in the disputes, production and morphology of groups of cultural producers and consumers mostly developed by the French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu (1986, 1993). When we use the idea of a position in the field, then, we are thinking of the space occupied by artists in relation to their peers. In other words, how does one individual compare to its peers as made explicit by the indexes of one’s successful (or problematic) career: the positive or negative reviews in the press, the institutional links, the awards, the number of exhibitions in respected galleries or museums, participation in Biennales etc.

It is this position, privileged in contrast not only to the situation described in 2004 but also in relation to the position of other pioneers in different national contexts in the sixties and seventies, that makes the Brazilian case study such an aberration in the histories of new media, electronic or digital art. Rather than being realized by engineers head-

ing to art, as in the cases of Frieder Nake, Michael Noll, Georg Nees and others, BTA begins with one of the most recognizable and respected leaders of the Brazilian concrete art movement: Waldemar Cordeiro.

Already an established and central figure in Brazilian art in the late sixties, a period which marks his first computational experiments (Kac, 1997), Cordeiro's support and argument in favour of computers and IT is repeated by the actions and words of his contemporaries and the generation that follows. In fact, this list is vast and cannot be dealt within a short paper: We can see this support in the words of Augusto and Haroldo de Campos, respected poets and scholars also belonging to the concrete tradition (Campos, 1997); in the exhibitions organized by the director of the São Paulo Museum of Contemporary Art (MAC), Walter Zanini (1997), which still figures as one of the central institutions of Brazilian art; in the spaces dedicated to the discussion of computer art in newspapers and the media of the time (Buongermino et al., 1972), as well as of cybernetics in relation to art (Barroso, 1958); in the *poesia processo* experiments of Wladimir Dias-Pino (Dias-Pino & Kac, 2015) etc.

Between the late sixties and the seventies, then, to comprehend the status given to BTA is to look for its concrete art links. A phenomenon also seen in other nations, especially in Germany (Klütsch, 2012), early BTA is, in essence, a by-product of a dominant discourse in Brazilian artistic circles at the time. Exemplified by the connection between Max Bense and the de Campos brothers, the links that tie these new artworks and their reception must not be thought outside the importance of concretism and the standing of its followers in Brazil. Whereas concrete art in Europe and the US was one of the many active styles of the postwar period, the Brazilian concrete tradition is, even today (and for better or worse), a standard for thinking about contemporary art and its development (Amaral, 2006; Asbury, 2006; Moura, 2011).

Technology in the periphery

Despite the importance of its supporters, BTA was not, in any sense, as technically developed as its counterparts in the northern hemisphere. The reason for this is straightforward: Brazil did not have a well-developed computing or electronics industry that, in many cases, supported the works of pioneers and dedicated institutions in the US or Europe (Nunez, 2016; Shanken, 2005). In Brazil there were no associations such as SIGGRAPH, CAS and E.A.T. or sponsors such as ACM, IBM, Westinghouse, BCS etc. Moreover, given the military government propensity in promoting local producers in order to control the whole manufacturing process of electronics and computers, later consecrated by decree and protectionist policies, Brazilian hardware was not *on par* with or commonplace as its northern hemisphere counterparts. While BTA mostly developed via connections between artists and academics, as in Cordeiro's example, who alongside Giorgio Moscati, a physicist at the University of São Paulo, used the univer-

sity infrastructure to develop his own works (Fabris, 1997), the industrial sector support seen in other developed nations was almost inexistent¹.

Yet, this same lack of resources and support, alongside the artistic pedigree of its supporters, seems to counterintuitively play a beneficial part in the artistic reception of early BTA, a reception far different from the one seen in other nations, where by the early seventies hostility, prejudice and disregard were the norm (Taylor, 2014). Whereas artists in the US and Europe would gravitate towards dedicated institutions such as the ones mentioned above, either because these offered material support or because the inherent difficulty in finding a niche in traditional art spaces, especially following the humanistic turn of the late sixties (Nunez, 2016; Taylor, 2014), early BTA, although poor and lacking specialized resources, saw its position in traditional art spaces as a normative development of art itself. It, in other words, did not need to retreat to its own space so it could thrive: its space was within the same institutions, museums, groups and galleries belonging to normal, non-electronic art.

We can see this unusual development when we look at some of the exhibitions and artworks of the period following the first adventures of Cordeiro. It is this next generation that, we believe, really stand out in the history of new media art: rather than focusing on technology *per se*, these exhibitions were dedicated to ANY new technology. As such, it is in 1985, the last year of the military government, that we find the paradigmatic exhibition that clearly reflects this unifying characteristic of early BTA. *Arte: novos meios/multimeios. Brasil '70/80*, realized at the *Museu de Arte Brasileira*, a private museum belonging to a private university in one of the richest São Paulo neighborhoods, was a huge undertaking reflecting both the propensity to think as new media anything that was not usual to artists and, at the same time, simpler and complex technologies. As its curator at the time wrote it, the exhibition was the "first attempt to reunite in the same space a broad collection of artistic manifestations that are expressed through non-traditional means – new media – and its intersections – multimedia" (Peccinini, 2010, p. 13 Author's translation). Explicitly organized with the intention of revisiting 15 years of unconventional Brazilian art, it exhibited around 1500 artworks and it had 65 artists, showing in the same space and under the same label very different objects, namely: "computer art, super-8, audio-visual devices, offset prints, stamp art, heliography, photocopy art, mail art, videotext art, audio art, facsimile art, video art, intermedia installations" (Ibid.). At it we had more traditional computer artworks, such as the prints realized by Cordeiro and Moscati (Figure 1), placed alongside the photocopies and

¹ A notable exception is the avantgarde magazine *Código* and its editor, Erthos Albino de Souza. An engineer at Petrobras, Erthos produced generative poems whilst at his main occupation, in a similar fashion to German or American pioneers. Following a recent grant, *Código* has been recently scanned and uploaded in its entirety. It can be found at codigorevista.org.

mail art projects of Paulo Bruscky (Figure 2 and 3). New media, in this context, did not signify computers or electronic devices. The label new media or, as the curator puts it, *multimeios*, encompassed all unconventional and new technologies of its time, from holography to off-set prints, from super-8 films to teletext animations.

Conclusion

We have briefly seen that, differently than the dire situation described by artists and critics of 2004, the early efforts of Brazilian artists engaged with new technologies, computers included, was very much in tune and accepted by the local artistic field. Although not as technically complex as its northern hemisphere counterparts, these early artworks were normatively framed as valid expressions by the field in general. From the point of view of its legitimacy at the time we can conclude that, in contrast to our contemporaries, the symbolic stock of current practitioners, i.e. the acceptance of these practices as art, is far from guaranteed.

This conclusion, however, raises two distinct questions. The first, related to our case study, is concerned with the changes testified by that 2004 group. If, as we have demonstrated, the early position of BTA pioneers was relatively comfortable, what happened after the Brazilian dictatorship that resulted in the difficulties narrated by contemporaries? It seems that in the nineteen-year gap that separate both events, the 1985 *multimeios* exhibition and the 2004 petition, enormous social, technical and artistic chances resulted in a gradual but certain exclusion of BTA from the cannon of Brazilian art. It is a consequence of this exclusion, perhaps, that can be seen in the requests of autonomy and exclusivity seen in the 2004 petition.

The second question raised by these observations is related to the peculiar position of developing nations such as Brazil and the development of electronic art practices in these contexts. Unable to match its developed counterparts, artists in Brazil expressed their questioning of traditional artistic supports not with complex or expensive hardware, but rather with readily available technologies. Although artworks classically seen as ‘electronic’ or ‘computer’ art do exist, these were not, as one might expect by looking at the histories of such practices in developed nations, seen in exclusive and dedicated spaces such as ISEA itself. Is it the case, then, that the very material backwardness of nations such as Brazil resulted in very different histories of electronic art? Hopefully, with the development of the research sketched here, we will be able to answer those questions.



Figure 1. “A mulher que não é B.B.” (Detail), 1969, Off-set print and IBM 360/44 computer



Figure 2. “Auto-Retrato”, 1975, mail art and envelope



Figure 3. “Xeroperformance”, n.d., photocopier machine and performance

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