

De-Colonizing Art Institutions

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BE CAREFUL WITH THE FIRE

by Túlio Tavares

Is a(r)tivism a joke?
Is a(r)rivisme serious?

How many belly buttons make a collective?
Belly(b)uttonism?



Art goes beyond the perception that we have of it in real time. In fact, what is seen isn't exactly art, but a kind of distorted reflection. Therefore it is easy to be blinded in the moment that we want to understand it.

It all began in the early 2000s. We were in a great series of transformations, trying to create survival tactics through the exchange of interests, content and affections. We produced outside the financial circuit, working collectively, creating collectives, taking part in other collectives, articulating with each other. I ended up in the middle of a hurricane, and a hurricane only happens if everything is ready for it to happen; a hurricane never comes out of nowhere, the elements were all there: the correct amount of humidity, the right amount of air, the change in temperature from here to there, wind x passes just below wind y and, boom!, a hurricane exploded. What I say is this: everything was in the air for this coming together to happen, a chaotic city and artists organised in collectives and social movements. All the logic that would cause this to happen was there, before even this hurricane, which happened freely, with no strings attached, without contracts. We knew the symbolic force that this urban network could have in the micro and macro political spheres.

We radically positioned ourselves against spectacular culture and spectacularisation in general, or rather, against the non-participation, alienation and passiveness of society. We proposed the participation of individuals in all fields of social life, especially in culture.

Even nowadays, many of these collectives produce actions that are practices of intervention in public spaces, combining art and activism which are spread through virtual and face to face networks. Using network communication back then, we ended up organising actions against icons of the neoliberal system.

Art produces images, sounds and memory. It reverberates in society and in people, who then reverberate with even more people. Biological metaphor and dissemination. Art speaks of social time, it changes the course of historic time and transforms society.

We live in war in the city of São Paulo. It starts here, with the hypothesis that the art collectives using public space as the field of action all had something in common. Collective artistic projects question the relationship between art, politics and issues of life in this city, which produces a strategically excluded space. They operate in a minefield, where it might not be possible to enter without putting themselves at risk.

Hence the search by grassroots movements, to go to the city, to the squats, to abandoned places, places that no one sees. We knew that new symbols could be produced, even if they were symbols that might fall out of the category of 'art'. Because these groups stopped being an art movement and became a movement of the city, environmental, political and social, bringing the field of art closer to that of political activism, as a result of interventions in non-institutionalised spaces and with an eminently critical character.

The art world didn't understand then what was happening: the reference to art is annihilated. We weren't better understood by theorists or even by ourselves. We ended up losing ourselves. There were symbolic barricades against the police; signs advertising real estate were stolen from the streets, repainted

with forms and designs by the EIA collective. Things were never in any form of order, far from anything recognisable. How do you create a symbolic artistic barrier which interrupts the actions of the police on a day of eviction? The police would have to remove artwork from their path, to invade the squat and take people out. Those barriers made from real estate signs were being repeated, until they were repainted by the Elefante collective and ended up with the word 'DIGNITY'. Now it was possible to understand a little better. Now it is no longer a work of art trying to block the arrival of the police, it is the word 'DIGNITY'. They were barriers because those signs had a physical size for this, and we imagined the riot police arriving and trying to take many things from inside. But now they would mainly have to remove the word 'DIGNITY'.



The artists that produced art at that time used to manipulate information, they would manipulate how a certain group of social housing would be seen by the media. Everything very plastic, everything very imagetic.

It wasn't easy, it wasn't simple. It was a moment of great tension. In the air was the danger of having to leave running in the middle of the night. We were there producing art, experimenting.

I believe that the movement of these collectives will become famous when they no longer pose a threat, when it no longer smells like shit, when it becomes photos, films, books, master's degrees, PhDs, post-theses, to appear in large biennales and museums in order to say why that symbolic act was important. Right now, when the movement appears to be perfume is when the virus, implanted there at the back, right at the start, before the hurricane forms, will be eternally unbalancing, messing things up, disorganising and disrupting. New people there at the front, even with things neatly packaged, will be co-opted by this disorganising virus. They will think powerful, potent things and continue to disintegrate. That is bigger intention, that all this history is an eternal disintegrating element of absolute values. A viral process of collective agency of temporary autonomous zones, produced starting from incessant dissenting recompositions and not from a logic of consensus. They are facts that point to the limits between the power of subversions and the power of co-optation within the system of art and life; a moment in which the art system and the political and economic system manage to take ownership of every critical movement of disruption.

They are 'becomings' of a historical construction, actions and absurd or surreal interferences in time and some place in the universe that is infinite.

Present in this text are the voices of Sebastião de Oliveira Neto, Ricardo Rosas, André Mesquita, Fabiane Borges, Flavia Sammarone, Milena Durante, Ricardo Basbaum, Plato.

Artwork *Becareful with the fire*, 2003, Túlio Tavares

This work consisted of a collage of letters that formed the phrase "BE CAREFUL WITH THE FIRE", which was carried out on a wall on the terrace of the last floor of the Ocupação Prestes Maia squat, with a view to the city. It was a clear reference to the fire that happened in the building in September 2003, three months, therefore, before the exhibition *ACMSTC*, which resulted in the destruction of four storeys and the death of a four year old girl. The tension of the situation is clear here: If on one side there is a direct reference to the tragedy that occurred in the building, on the other it highlights the risk of that event-occurrence. "To catch fire" had as much to do with the fire as with the explosions and repercussions that an event like that could cause.

<https://tuliotavares.wordpress.com/>

<https://tuliotavares.wordpress.com/prestes-maia-acoes-culturais/>

<https://tuliotavares.wordpress.com/acmstc/>

<http://integracaoemposse.zip.net/>



Artistas na Ocupação Prestes Maia, juntos ao Movimento Popular por Moradia.



fotos: Antônio Brasiliano