

## **Art under attack: new backwardness and new forms of censorship**

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“Fifty years ago, those who marched with God, for family and property, were the ones neglected by modernization, representative of an age-old Brazil, that fought not to disappear, even though they were the winners [...] Whereas the new backwardness of bolsonarismo, equally scandalous, is of a different kind and is far from being obsolete. The desecularization of politics, the theology of prosperity, the pro-gun ideals, the attacks on speed traps, the hatred towards organized workers etc. are not old-fashioned nor are they from another time.” Roberto Schwarz, 2019 [1].

Literary critic and sociologist Roberto Schwarz, author of “Cultura e política, 1964–1969” [Culture and politics, 1964–1969], one of the most fundamental texts on the artistic production in the early years of the military dictatorship (1964–1985), drew comparisons between the current political moment and the early years of the dictatorship in a recent interview. Fifty years after the publication of the essay in which he argued that there was still a hegemony of the left in the cultural sphere, at a time when economic modernization was associated with a backward political order, he uses the expression “neotrasto bolsonarista” [bolsonarista [2] new backwardness] to refer to a repetition of old models that never stopped existing.

The new conservatism of the bolsonarista model has some particular characteristics—the return of censorship is certainly one of them. Although, as Schwarz argues in the same interview, “our cultural freedom has always had class prerogative as a blatant character” (Schwarz, 2019), this issue had been resolved in the post-democratization period, among the many other issues to be overcome. At least that’s what it looked like.

Since our first conversations about this project and how contemporary forms of censorship should be addressed, as Tatiane Schilaro points out in “Against, Again and the true meaning of courage,” we have chosen to think about silencing and oppression practices in broad terms. In addition, we were careful to not overuse the word

“censorship,” so as it didn’t seem anachronistic or even exaggerated. We do not have—at least not yet—censors in newspapers, as was the case with the 1970 Censorship Law; or the Censorship department in Brasília’s Federal Police. But in recent months, with the increasing cases of closings of exhibitions, films, and plays; of cancellations of grants for projects that are deemed too liberal; in addition to recurring attacks and threats to press freedom, our initial avoidance of the word “censorship” has ceased to make sense.

In the week that I write this text, in March 2020, an exhibition at the Hélio Oiticica Municipal Arts Center, in Rio de Janeiro, had just been suspended by order of the Municipal Secretary of Culture. The LGBT+ and HIV positive artist, Órion Lalli also received a court notification for religious vilification for his artwork depicting the Virgin Mary with bare breast and male genitalia. The project *Observatório de Censura à Arte* [art censorship observatory], created by a journalist collective from Porto Alegre (RS), maps these censorship cases[3]. The first alarming episode of recent cultural censorship took place in the city of Porto Alegre in 2017, with the closing of the Santander Cultural exhibition *QueerMuseum: Cartografia da Diferença na Arte Brasileira* [Queermuseum: Cartography of Difference in Brazilian Art]. The conservative political movement *Movimento Brasil Livre*—MBL [Free Brazil Movement] led a social media campaign disseminating messages against the exhibition and claiming that artworks in the show incited “immorality” and pedophilia[4]. The result was the shutdown of the exhibition one month after its opening.

### **Hate is Wearing no Uniform**

Hate speech propagated online with the help of an immense virtual army of fake profiles on social media platforms is another aspect of this new backwardness. As we know, the strategy is not unique to Brazil. Just like the last presidential elections in the US, in Brazil fake online profiles were widely used by Bolsonaro’s political campaign as a way to spread fake news and moralizing messages that easily echoed with its conservative base. Randolpho Lamonier’s 2018 flag carrying the phrase “*Hate is wearing no uniform*” at the entrance to the exhibition, serves as an indicator of a new strategy of social control camouflaged as spontaneous manifestations—perhaps much more efficient than a proper Censorship Division from the government.

Giselle Beiguelman's artwork *Hateland*, also resonates with this topic. The work is comprised of a series of videos with comments published on social platforms about recent events of great public repercussion—such as the murder of Rio de Janeiro's council member Marielle Franco in March 2018. The artist mapped the comments on YouTube videos with over half million views—some of them from conservative leaders who rose in the political arena at that time, such as the federal legislator Joice Hasselmann. The artist edited video and sound, displaying phrases against a black background juxtaposed with the audio content, in order to evidence the cycle of self-perpetuating speeches which differ only in appearance: on the one hand, the rawness of unfiltered comments, many of those anonymous ("*Every time a black person dies these days, it's a fricking media frenzy!*"; "*All those who advocate for criminals must die*"); on the other, hate speech disguised in a more moderate tone ("*This deserves a bible spanking*," the legislator says).

Aleta Valente (@ex\_miss\_febem3) also uses similar strategy in the work *Misoginia está vazando* [*Misogyny is leaking*] (2016), in which she collected the online threats she received after posting a photograph displaying her own menstrual blood. Working predominantly on social media, the artist explores the performance of self-representation, playing with social stereotypes. Using sharp humor and irony, she documents her daily life in a neighborhood in the periphery of Rio de Janeiro while displacing the idealized representation of the female body and playing with an eroticism that can be often disturbing. In the video, on the left side of the screen we see the photo she posted on Facebook, next to the screen capture of the comments she received on the social media platform. Posing with her feet on her head and displaying menstrual blood leaking off her white outfit, she received comments such as "*Girl, I'm not obliged to be a feminist*," "*I want to see how far this shitty movement goes*," "*Is it a prerequisite to be a pig, disgusting and filthy to be a feminist?*"

The artist no longer has a Facebook account and two of her previous Instagram profiles were taken down. Her case exemplifies the ways in which the dissemination of hate speech has gained such an important role as one of the most efficient forms of censorship: although these social media platforms officially mediate content based on specific criteria of what is allowed by the "community," pages and profiles end up being removed from the platforms by users' complaints. With a virtual army of greater penetration in these spaces, the extreme right stipulates its rules. Within a confused and nebulous logic, whoever screams the loudest wins.

One of the goals of the collective #Cóleraalegria is to occupy virtual and real spaces to counter their increasingly moralizing discourses. The flags and posters collectively created to be adopted online or in demonstrations are not considered artistic objects, nor do they have an individualized author. While the works exist essentially as images shared in social media networks, branching out between this and other hashtags, they also gained physical presence in political demonstrations held in the public space. It is there that the banners are held by protesters, gaining corporeality and a collective dimension.

Ismael Monticelli also explores the idea of media insertions and the use of the body as media. In the work *Corpo Político [Body politic]* (2019), the artist maps the protest slogans stamped in T-shirts worn in political demonstrations. In addition to cataloging on his Instagram account the result of an image search (a total of 646 images)—many found through hashtags, some that were sent by acquaintances, or even suggested by the social media platform's algorithm because of his search history— he created new T-shirts with phrases from ten Brazilian artists whose politica artworks spanned periods of censorship during the dictatorship.

One of Monticelli's artists phrases turned into T-shirts is by Cildo Meireles, who is also featured in the exhibition with *Projeto Cédulas [Banknote Project]*, part of the *Insertions in Ideological Circuits* series started in 1970. The phrase reads: "*I think you can do anything as long as you take individual responsibility. As long as you don't want to engage this project as a collective desire*"[5]. Taken from an interview in which Meireles talked about his moral commitment to not produce artworks that are purely propaganda, his statement opens up an important connection with the current moment when the notion of collectivity seems increasingly overshadowed by individual interests and desires – but very far from any sense of responsibility.

Perhaps this is one of the challenges of the artistic production in the current Brazilian context: how far it is possible to assume the role of a collective dimension while in the social sphere this sense has been emptied, dominated by polarized individual battles.

[1] Claudio Leal, "Neoatraso bolsonarista repete clima de 1964, diz Roberto Schwarz." November 15th, 2019, accessed March 13rd, 2020, 2,

<https://www1.folha.uol.com.br/ilustrissima/2019/11/neoatraso-bolsonarista-repete-clima-de-1964-diz-roberto-schwarz.shtml>.

[2] Bolsonaroistas are those who follow the political ideas of Brazil's President Jair Bolsonaro.

[3] <http://www.censuranaarte.nonada.com.br>.

[4] Gobbi, Nelson (2017). "Em nota a clientes, Santander explica encerramento de mostra LGBT em Porto Alegre." *O Globo*, 09/11/17 <https://oglobo.globo.com/cultura/artes-visuais/em-nota-clientes-santander-explica-encerramento-de-mostra-lgbt-em-porto-alegre-21807901>

[5] Scovino, Felipe (2009). Cildo Meireles. Série Encontros. 1ª ed. Rio de Janeiro: Azougue Editorial, p. 126.

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