

## **Rio Grande do Sul/21st century: as the crow flies**

**Paulo Herkenhoff**

**2018**

How should one present a complex state of the art? This introduction sets out a brief agenda, raising points for debate, without exhausting them. What is the gaucho difference on the Brazilian scene? Here we have the limited judgment of a sporadic visitor. This is by no means a list of the best gaucho artists of the 21st century, for what is contemplated is the system, the context, the collective agenda and a set of twelve individualities that feed the gaucho diversity, not through the aleatory, but rather through construction. Twelve texts which individualize each artist, which identify projects and meanings in the works on display. These artists seem to know that the will to power is fueled by knowledge.

The tropical country is not a true reflection of Brazil. I asked the twelve artists if they lived in a tropical country. The answers were negative. Only Cristiano Lenhardt said he lives in one *now*, because he has settled in Recife. Don't expect any country bumpkin or tropicalist inklings of the gauchos. Rafael Pagatini's outlook is an example: "the cultural imposition of the Rio-São Paulo axis through the artistic representation of the tropics constructed the *official* history of Brazilian art, which excluded not only Rio Grande do Sul, but practically all the other states too. An imposition that was derived from economic forces. In this regard, I conceive art as a possible category of counter-narrative, counter-imaginary formations, which creates a vocal field where the traditional discourse of a fetishized Brazil as an exotic, hypersexualized fringe country, is deconstructed."

The first point of observation has always been the material nature of the sign, and the dense polysemy among gauchos. In general, they are not neutral symbols, like Leandro's good hair, in overcoming slavery-induced prejudice. The materialistic focus on the sign, like in the dictators' portraits mounted with nails, expresses Pagatini's excruciating vision of the dark times of 1964. Philosophy is a driving force for reflection on art and its condition in the world. It is not the artist's duty to illustrate theories or take them as a legitimating factor of the work. In the field of philosophy, one can high light phenomenology [Merleau-Ponty, Husserl, Langer, Bachelard, Gullar, Lyotard

and Birnbaum]. Ismael Monticelli's *Notes on to what extent a landscape can enter an eye* [Apontamentos sobre o quanto de uma paisagem pode entrar em um olho] demonstrates the phenomenological disposition for the problem of the visible and the invisible, posed by Merleau-Ponty. His objects that reinterpret the neoconcretists (Oiticica, Pape, Dillon and Carvão) indicate the affinity with Merleau-Ponty, as cited in the *Neoconcrete Manifesto*: "no one ignores that no human experience is limited to one of man's five senses, since man reacts with a totality and that, in the symbolic body (Ponty), the senses decipher one another."

Psychoanalysis (Freud and Lacan) and dimensions of the unconscious (political, graphic, mathematical, spatial) reside in this art. And where do Artaud and Bataille sit? Ío warns us that the clash is mythical between Eros and Thanatos, and Freudian between the instincts of life and death, for *Extinction is the norm of life (all my dreams are violent)*. The libidinal economy is nailed down by anguish and cruelty. Might there be a gaucho spatial unconscious, perhaps the platitude and cultural history of the Pampas? In Ío's work, tradition emerges from repression like a nightmare. With irony, Isabel Ramil challenges the father's Law, the gender-based models. She presents a challenge about sexuality and the biopolitics of the body and gender that bring Michel Foucault's will to knowledge to mind.

In 21st century Rio Grande do Sul, the *Angelus novus* of Walter Benjamin's history collectively constructs events, casting a serious gaze on the catastrophe of such a turbulent period and on forthcoming uncertainties. This is the state of alert that results in an art with so much meaning for society, heedful of the power relations, of the history of the victors and of the consolidation of Brazilian art itself.

Unlike the narcissistic or auto-cannibalistic landscape of Rio or the haughty or triumphalist landscape of São Paulo, the new scenery of Rio Grande do Sul politicizes the territory. The artists here do not legitimate themselves through gaucho pride; they conceive the landscape without geopolitical marketing. On the other hand, the cultural-historical trait of the cultural place in some, like Daniel Escobar, Ío, Isabel Ramil, Leandro Machado, Marina Camargo and Xadalu, is resolved in friction, clashes, contradictions and violence, reminiscent of Freud in *Civilization and its Discontents*.

A rare diversity of approaches to landscape can be appreciated at RSXXI. The gaucho artist wants Brazil, the world (Camargo and Zózimo), the cosmic and the intimate (Carlos Asp). Monticelli has prepared his *Instructions Manual for Building*

*Landscapes at Home* [Manual de instruções para construir paisagens em casa]. Here the deep landscape of Brazil is densely construed, going beyond a minor, single-camera visit to the seventeenth century *grand tour*. Zózimo has published theoretical essays by the German Augusto Mayer on landscape, an outstanding publication. The video installation *Vigília* by André Severo, with seven simultaneous projections, is one of the most sophisticated landscapes of Brazil. Severo's entire oeuvre equates to a system of art, such are the directions of his art mediation actions. *How to ake a desert* [Como se faz um deserto] is Marina Camargo's artist's book about the Sertão – the arid outback of the Brazilian northeast – and how it is erased, in a revisit that recalls Glauber Rocha, Celso Furtado and Josué de Castro. In *Tacuarembó*, she connects toponymy, colonial invasion, symbolic and phonetic war of the pampas. Finally, *Topophilia or contaminations between space and thought* [Topofilia ou contaminações entre espaço e pensamento] is a debate about space, place, nonsite, history and human presence.

In Rio Grande do Sul, the art of cartography, solid by comparison to the rest of the country today, is developed in maps crossed by Kant, Humboldt and Goethe (Marina Camargo), by Borges and Cildo Meireles, Agamben and Karl Schlägel, Lothar Baumgarten and Torres-García, geopolitical projects for the expansion of the Amazonian borders and consolidation of the territorial sea (Pocztaruk), symbolic reterritorialization of the Guarani (Xadalu), conceptual, situational, *poveri* maps. The concept of cartography in Brazil has broadened in unparalleled fashion in Porto Alegre.

What constitutes place? Art in 21st century Rio Grande do Sul consists of clippings of citizenship that have formed responses to traditions, tackle the contradictions of the socio-historic place and elect their aesthetic, ethical and conceptual challenges, like the Guarani, Chárrua and other native peoples, slavery, the pampas and the culture of the place, the conflicts between the patriarchal and new gender orientation. In *Indigenous Territory* (Território indígena), green and yellow signs (the colours of the "Homeland" which excludes its citizens) were scattered around downtown Porto Alegre, causing a commotion between the Guarani (who took back what had been their land, now to sell their handicrafts) and the other merchants and shop owners, fearing expropriation.

Brazil is gaúcho. These young artists take on the agenda of Brazil. They are no longer restricted by the state boundaries. They engage with the whole country, proposing Brazilian narratives, like Pagatini and the lead years in Espírito Santo,

Pocztaruk and the dictatorship's megalomaniac Transamazonian Highway, Camargo and the northeastern Sertão and Monticelli and his Brazilian constructive project.

Rio Grande do Sul is the hub of a vast array of artist books. These are not luxury albums, with high added value, a market fetish. They are books in the essential condition of autonomous, democratic language, vehicles for visual thought, manuals of delirium, clusters of almost nothing, of the *infra-mince* or the *humílimominimalismo* (Cildo Meireles), experimental structures, creation of enigmas, condensation of reflections and theories, in short, they are built as knowledge for intelligence.

Perhaps more than in other states and their writers, the artists of RSXXI openly cite gaucho literature – the violence of João Simões Lopes Neto, the classic Érico Veríssimo, Dyonélio Machado, the pseudo Augusto Mayer, the levity of Mario Quintana and contemporaries like the political columnist Josué Guimarães, Caio Fernando Abreu, João Gilberto Noll and Daniel Galera. In Rio Grande do Sul literature is a trigger for imaginary creation for many artists, even more so than music. It is an art of narratives, of the word, of phonetics, of artist books, of well-read books, never illustrated but revitalized in a new linguistic field. In this state, the modernity of Jorge Luis Borges seems like a more fertile and influential imaginary realm to the contemporary eye than a Mario de Andrade or a Tarsila. Gaucho artists read more Latin American literature – not only Borges (Adolfo Bioy Casares, Julio Cortázar, Eduardo Galeano, Roberto Bolaños, Gabriel García Márquez and others) – than their peers from other parts of Brazil tend to. It is said that Brazil is a nation “facing the sea”, with its back turned to Latin America. The culture of Rio Grande do Sul belies this emphatically. Gaucho artists today, more so than three decades ago, intimately acknowledge their affinities with Uruguay, Argentina and Paraguay. This is a gaucho difference that deepens the cultural wealth of Brazil. Thanks to Rio Grande do Sul, Brazil is more Latin American.

The Rio Grande do Sul scene of recent decades has been dominated by the emergence of model institutions. The Fundação Iberê Camargo, created in 1995 and inaugurated in 2008, with a building designed by Álvaro Siza, is an example of world class architecture. Porto Alegre opened spaces for artists that sparked the imagination, supported alternative processes to think about art socially, enlisted inventors, unsettled paradigms, welcomed creative risk-taking, dug out a place for experimental art in Brazil as a forum of freedom and knowledge *of that which was not on the map*. Flexible would

describe the gaucho standard of the Brazilian artist who produces his own art and engages the social sphere of culture beyond the capital, the market and the State apparatus.

The massive leap taken by the Mercosul Bienal (1997) was the start of a virtuous circle that created a visible place for art in Rio Grande do Sul and benefitted its general public, unparalleled in Brazil. Its greatest problem stemmed from the provincialism of the excessive internationalist focus, eager to impress foreigners. The Mercosul Bienal was always hesitant in granting its curatorial responsibility to gauchos. Out of eleven editions, only one has had a local curator. Whereas the São Paulo Bienal was conceived as an arena for Brazilian art, the Mercosul event was unable to develop platforms for the effective strategic recognition of gaucho art, which would expose its potential, for it has always appeared dispersed, exempt of deeper or more categorical collective interpretations. There was a cultural lack of assertive courage among the critics and curators of Rio Grande do Sul.

The transformation of the Rio Grande do Sul university system, with historiographic production being decentralized from the southeast, began in the 1980s with a group of UFRGS professors who went abroad, especially to France, for their education. These, mostly female, pioneers defined a solid academic line that today sees UFRGS holding a primary relationship with French aesthetic thought. This process expanded throughout Brazil in the 1990s and has been consolidated this century. The UFRGS Arts Department is one of the best-staffed faculties in Brazil.

Could this cycle, which resulted in the formulation of an exemplary teacher-artist productive relationship at UFRGS, now be over? In the relentless dynamic of culture, the challenge of the UFRGS Graduate Program in Visual Arts (PPGAV) would now seem to disperse the certain degree of anxiety from some by proving to be up to date with the foreign bibliography [at times, with copycat syndrome], but opening itself up more to the historiography and theory of Brazil and taking risks with more commitment and audacity to create its own thinking. The preconditions are given. This may become another great, differential contribution made by UFRGS to the academic art system and to Brazilian society in general.

Rio Grande do Sul is a ghetto. Province and buffer-state, *cornered* in the South of Brazil, between Santa Catarina, Uruguay and Argentina. For some separatists, Rio Grande do Sul is an enclave between three countries. The gaucho ghetto results from

the geographic circumstances and the market isolation, from the institutions that drive the national system and the economy of art. Cildo Meireles, the most beloved living Brazilian artist of all the participants of RSXXI, defined a place category, the *ghetto* described as “place of concentrated information. Place where knowledge circulates and, therefore, builds up more speed than its surroundings, and in the end causes and inversion, becoming richer. Inside there will be a greater circulation of information than outside the ghetto.” Meireles gives a clue as to the meaning of the gaucho ghetto: the dense creative energy that circulates like the astrophysical forces of a black hole. Its autonomous departure from art is across the Da Prata River, passing beyond the power filters of the Rio-São Paulo axis.

[Text originally published in the exhibition catalog *RSXXI – Rio Grande Experimental*, Santander Cultural, Porto Alegre, Brazil, 2018.]