

Largo da Batata Video Art and São Paulo's forthcoming arenas of protest

Through the critical analysis of the events surrounding the "Passe Livre" manifestations, we track the importance and use of large scale video during the São Paulo protests. This paper follows the steps taken by the seven individuals that organized a video intervention during the political gathering of the 17th of July 2013 at Largo da Batata (São Paulo) where operating from an improvised media HQ they projected political slogans against a building while the crowd roared and cheered below. From the initial preparations to the aftermath of those actions, we aim to understand the constraints and possibilities offered by new visual Medias and scrutinize what implications they bring in terms of the "realization" of the public space within the urban landscape. We also analyze these events under the view of the temporary hegemonies concept (Mouffe, 2000; Mouffe, 2005) arguing that large scale urban projections are responsible for adding a new layer in terms of temporality, as we focus on discussing the impact of these new strategies for the creation of "instantaneous" arenas of political contest.

Agonism, São Paulo, Video Art, Passe Livre, Largo da Batata

SÃO PAULO - A CRITICAL APPRAISAL

"It's a beautiful thing, the destruction of words." – George Orwell, 1984

For me, an outsider, São Paulo somehow resembles to a paper wrapped city. I can't really see its insides. But it is where the edges start ripping the paper, that I (the outsider) am able to peek just enough to start guessing more about its contents.

For several reasons in the last couple of years I've been trying to follow more closely the socio-political agenda of São Paulo, as I became fascinated by its strong political consciousness. But unfortunately so far I was only able to witness on how the efforts and struggle to eliminate social asymmetries were continuously frustrated within the same Society as it reacts against itself in order to maintain the status quo. While not capable of understanding the mechanisms underlying this behavior, São Paulo still appeals to me for being a living laboratory where the political is enacted within the city daily life. This diligent and somehow paranoid collective identity, that keeps ripping and weaving an anthropophagic narrative, simultaneously builds and consumes on its own self.

Taking into consideration the contributions given by some authors like Jacques Rancière, Rosalind Deutsch, or Chantal Mouffe which explain the constitution of the political as something only possible through an act of struggle for the redistribution of visibility (Rancière, 2010; Mouffe, 2005; Deutsch, 1998), we propose yet another perspective regarding the recent social and political convulsions on São Paulo under the scope of political actions taken by a generation of counter-publics - from which a state of continuous dissensus emerges. Mainly for that reason the current reflection not only aims to document the chain of events behind the 2013 Brazilian protests, but by focusing our analysis in the actions led by some of the protagonists of the Largo da Batata gathering¹, we also aim to produce a critical inquiry about the new nature of São Paulo's counter-publics. This nature - that derives from the unprecedented capabilities of using the urban landscape as the platform for discourse - also enables a vision from what the concept of Agonistic Arenas can be built upon.

FOR A DEMOCRATIC POLITICAL SPACE

"Social space is produced and structured by conflicts. With this recognition, spatial democratic politics begins" - Rosalyn Deutsche

Physical space refers to the built infrastructure of the organization and architecture environment, which may or may not be restricted within the urban context. Social space, on the other hand, refers to a space within the scenic sense - a stage for acts and actions where people interpret their social roles and assume the negotiation, appropriation and interpretation of ideas and visions that are external to them. Thereby the social space reflects the social order and its institutions with regard to specific forms of interaction and communication, but it is still a discursive space that indicates the ideas of city and urbanity in which later actions are taken upon. So only through the dialectical connection between the construction material, social practice, discourse, and representation is that public spaces are first created (Wildner, s.d).

The public space by being the sum of these relations between forms and practices remains always full of power and ideology (Deutsch, 1998), often becoming an arena for confrontation and intersection of individuals and their different expectations. But not only can we argue that it is within the urban space that the physical, social and discursive references are brought together in order for the debate to occur, but we should also understand the importance of action to trigger the enabling conditions. This means that in order to truly constitute itself the public space requires to be created and recreated again and again precisely from result of the debate between conflicting expectations and also the fight for the possession of the same rights (and even on the extension of these rights) to other groups within the same community (Deutsch, 1998). This opinion clearly diverges from the view of Habermas (Habermas, 1989) from which the concept of the Public Sphere originated and to whom it is impregnated by a speech free of dominance and that always seeks a final consensus. Instead Agonist theory argues that it is precisely when the conflict for hegemony erupts that the Public Sphere can be constituted without aiming to any sort of consensual resolution. It is only during Totalitarianism rule that public spaces are emptied of their contents as there is the need to deny the opportunity for confrontations that could question the very foundations of the political system. In order to preserve the existence of a common ground where conflicting positions can stand together and rights can be either acquired or sustained, it becomes crucial that the compound of conflictual society, politics, and ultimately public space, is not overshadowed or suppressed, as argued by the political models of consensus.



Fig. 1 - Overview of Largo da Batata in the beginning of the protest (Source: Eduardo Fernandes)

What seemed to emerge from a continuum of protests over the reduction in Public Transport fees (Movimento Passe Livre), rapidly escalated to violent disturbances in São Paulo, originated by groups of citizens that also demanded for social and political change. Since the overly privatized São Paulo does not offer its population the necessary use of public space required to enact the confrontation of opposites, this ended up by acting like a pressure cooker kept under control just by means of police and social repression. Yet, and after a crescendo of events (some of which that preceded but at some point intersected the Passe Livre manifestations), the 13th of July that marked the Battle of Consolação was the major outburst that resulted from the accumulated pressure. The high degree of repression used by the military police combined with the sophisticated and tactical use of social networks by the protesters – with the prominent role of NINJA (Narrativas Independentes, Jornalismo e Ação) responsible for video-streaming and documenting the insides of the Consolação protests – became a game changer as it set the conditions for the promoted the discourse of São Paulo's counterpublics directly to the central stage of visibility. NINJA was letting the World see what happened under the paper wrapped city, as now the previously absent Mass Media was forced to acknowledge and disseminate the repression held against the protesters by the military police. This fueled a very negative reaction in the public opinion as the vivid images of meaningless violence leaped the margins into the center and thus triggering the events of the 17th of July.

The protests of the 17th of July were meant not only to be a signal of reaction against the repression of Consolação but it also intended to be the carrier of other contents to a wider audience that now followed them at the television and even joined in the rallies. As the protest now revealed a far more ambitious agenda, it started stretching beyond the initial Passe Livre pleasant embracing more structural demands: the need to end the military police; the need to end its means of repression; the right of the overall population to better living conditions; the urgency of giving more importance to the reduction of the social inequalities.

This protest also marked the start of the dissemination process of the protests to other Brazilian cities that decided to organize their own rallies as an act of solidarity with the protesters of Consolação. The 17th of July went on to become the vehicle that brought the impregnated dissensus from within the inner layers of the city up to its superficial skin previously homogeneously occupied by the forces of central discourse.

TEMPORARY ARENAS OF DISCOURSE

"War is both father of all and king of all: it reveals the gods on the one hand and humans on the other, makes slaves on the one hand, the free on the other" - Heraclitus

We can understand transgression as a synthesis of the concept of territory as it is inherent to the movement that existing between territories contributes to establish the territory delimitations and its understandings. Since the precursor work of Naim Jung Paik that artists were able to restructure the artificial language that emanated from video and provoke a disruption in the previously linear relation established between the work of art and the environment around it. Video art now enabled the author to address the viewers in new and simultaneous forms, crossing and through transgression setting boundaries for new spaces and uncharted territories. The "Messages to the Public", a series of media-based interventions commissioned by the Public Art Funds is fundamental for this understanding. From 1982 and until 1990, every month a different visual artist were invited to make use of the Spectacolor central

screen of Times Square New York with a message that infiltrated the 15-20 minutes set of passing by commercials. This meant the possibility for the artists to use one of the prime spaces of the consumerist market to denounce and criticize aspects of that same consumer society. It was somewhat of a Trojan horse behind enemy lines, and some of the works presented there later became iconic and hugely influential to the following generations of artists - Jenny Holzer "Truisms" (1982); Barbara Kruger "I am not trying to sell you anything" (1983); or Martha Rosler "'If You Lived Here...'" (1989).

A more proximate work to the intervention of Largo da Batata came from artist Krzysztof Wodiczko and his action titled "Reagan Hand Shake" (1984) where the hand of the then presidential candidate Ronald Reagan was projected over the AT&T building located near Wall Street, denouncing the pledge of allegiance between those who aim the political power with those who possess the financial power. Again the transgression - channeled to an unprepared viewer and triggered by a provocative confrontation - and that announced the emergence of new arenas of political discourse in this emergent Media City.

The action in São Paulo came neither as the result of an arts grant program nor as an artistic gesture of protest. Instead it was the outcome of a challenge placed by a militant that while having access to the necessary equipment (as the result of also being a professional VJ), suggested that this sort of political action had the conditions to be accomplished by him and a handful of his friends that shared both his professional and ideological backgrounds. The plan for implementation was rather straightforward but rather complex in terms of logistics as it included carrying two large projectors (each weighting over 60 Kgs) to the 20th floor apartment that was made available by a common friend. Once there they would still need to secure access to a 2200 Watts and 19 amperes of stable electric supply in order to be able to project at a distance of 230 meters to an abandoned building that stood on the other side of the square (Largo da Batata). They had previously decided that they would only project simple and unambiguous slogans, directly related with the protest as it was crucial to keep the crowd focused before starting the march. But in reality, present conditions revealed to be so precarious that there wasn't even certainty that they could accomplish the video action. Due to long the curriculum of military repression², all precautions had to be taken by the participants of this action in order to maintain its total secrecy, namely restricting the access to mobile 3G in the room during the projections and this meant no direct communication with the protesters that were gathered below. Also the organizers of the protesters had scheduled the beginning of the march from Largo da Batata while there was still sunlight, which rendered impossible any projection. All this meant that they had to rely on a combination of factors that they could not control, and even in best case scenarios they would only have a rather narrow window of opportunity to operate from.

Although all the individuals that were present in the improvised "HQ" were hard seasoned Video artists, this was the first act of political protest developed by them, so when the moment of the projection actually came, their initial relief added to the surprise that came from witnessing the roaring reaction from the crowd down below. As Eduardo Fernandes, one of the interviewed protesters stated "When we turned on the projection the crowd roared. We never had this before with a projection (...) it was a rock star moment!"

The projection that occupied the whole building façade was available for everyone to see (protesters or not), thus becoming the ultimate transgression, crossing boundaries that not only questioned the nature and use of the city landscape as communication device, but also allowed that an external action coordinated the reactions of thousands of spectators that spontaneously assimilated and appropriated its contents. It was an action that bridged to a collective political moment of dissent at a scale never experienced before. The projection was transforming the urban landscape in an arena for political contest, acting as mediator between the intimate space of the individual and the public space for the collective dissensus. It is true that it remained only as a temporary occupation, but the political has no claim to last - its only purpose it to create a disruption in the system, and thus materialize a sense of urgency and redistribution of visibility (Mouffe, 2005; Rancière, 2010).

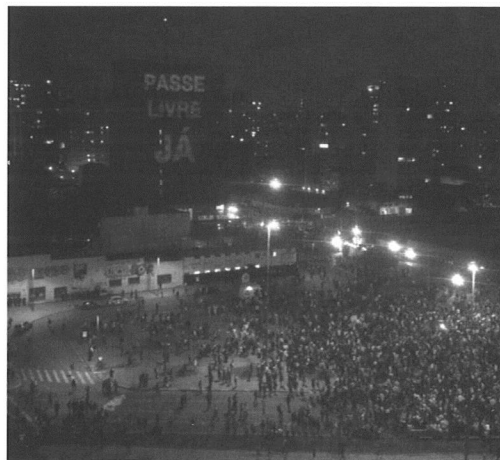


Fig. 2 - Image of Largo da Batata towards the end of the video action
(Source: Eduardo Fernandes)