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Modes of approach

By Lígia Nobre, architect and researcher.

“...the most important is to create the Brazil that we want...”

Darcy Ribeiro

The starting point of Laymert Garcia dos Santos' essay *Como a arte global transforma a arte étnica* [How global art is transforming ethnic art] (2009) is the intersection between Hans Belting e Andrea Buddensieg's concept of “global art” (relationships between contemporary art and ethnic art) and its institutionalisation – in particular with regard to museums and exhibitions in Europe for the past years. The exhibition *Die Tropen (Os Trópicos. Visões do Meio do Globo [The Tropics. Visions from the Middle of the Globe])*, with Alfons Hug, Peter Junge and Viola König as curators, set in the *Martin-Gropius Bau* in Berlin in the second semester of 2008, is problematised through a tropical lens, a “Brazilian look” affected by the emergence of the financial crisis and the resulting rearrangements in global geopolitics. Garcia dos Santos presented this essay in Recife in November 2009, at the Joaquim Nabuco Foundation for the international seminar *Depois do muro: a geopolítica das artes* [After the Wall: geopolitics of arts], whose first version was published in Germany in the book *The Global Art World – Audiences, Markets and Museums*, edited by Hans Belting e Andrea Buddensieg (ZKM/Hatje Cantz, 2009). Both versions were made available on the website of the international forum *geopolitics of culture and technology*, with Gilberto Gil and him as curators, that took place in November 2010 at the *Cinematheca Brasileira* in São Paulo with the support of Brazil's Ministry of Culture. The instances de diffusion of this essay, in conjunction with

its most important arguments, show us important indicators of the current diagrams and forces in stake, i.e., moment of intense and fast transformation that is happening in the country and in the world, and its implications for “art criticism” in Brazil, since the internationalization of artistic productions made here, as well as its capacity to point out our contradictions and internal challenges.

For the author, the exhibition *Die Tropen* is part of a movement that started with the exhibition *Magiciens de la Terre* at the *Centre George Pompidou* in Paris in 1986, went on the opening of the *Musée des Arts Premiers* at the *Quai Branly* in Paris in 2006, where maintain conceptual presuppositions that reify conventional convictions about the “West” and the “Other”. The main conceptual problem in *Die Tropen* would concern the modes of approach between ethnic and contemporary art: both are considered from a common denominator within the paradigm of the language of representation (a “visualistic approach”) and of the timeless character of art, and also considered metaphors of a nature that would be common to them. These presuppositions, instead of being taken as given, they should be the exact problematic to be solved, in case effectively one would like to confront the pieces of art in productive mode and to discuss the different perspectives about the Tropics. As anthropologist Eduardo Viveiros de Castro points out, only the “Western man” would consider that we have a common nature and multiple cultures; in the Amerindian perspective, there are multiple natures and one unique culture. The specificity of the look to the indigenous art implies not to take as a reference any definition of art previously given, be it aesthetic, interpretative or institutional. As anthropologist, Els Lagrou underlines “the place that the objects could occupy in the valorising scale established by the art market and by the museums does not necessarily belong to the universe of intentions and native values that can aim to very different objectives from the ones linked to the conquest of visibility or affirmation of identity and ‘authenticity’” [1].

The bundle of ambiguity unfolds itself in “how to see, for example, the nearing of the painting *Sampa*, by Beatriz Milhazes, with a headdress of the indigenous people Rigbatsa, from Brazil, or with a *Bark Painting*, from Papua-New Guinea? (...) It is “like if [ethnic art] would be used as the backdrop, as the ornamentation and *décor* for the display of the works of contemporary artists”. The Brazilian artist “draws interest for being “glocal”, that means, someone that anchors his work with the international language of modernism and at the same time keeps his roots in his time and his culture”. Laymert locates, in an instigating way, that in the opposite side of the one occupied by Milhazes – between the contemporary and the ethnic in the global spectrum – would aboriginal artists be.

What is of interest for us in this essay is to aim to look for new modes of approach, for the urgency to invent ourselves and articulate new matrices and understandings for art in/from Brazil: “what should be taken into account is that modern and contemporary Brazilian art never tried to be serious about its non relation with ethnic art, which was and still is produced, because it did not even ask itself the question if indigenous and traditional peoples were used to produce art and if they still continue to do so”. The author believes that “*in the framework that Belting understands as being global art, Brazil emerges as privileged place to follow the transformations of what is understood as contemporary art and as ethnic art, and the fecundation, or not, of one by the other*”.

In the last three decades, contemporary aboriginal painting in Australia got very well accepted in the Western market and in museological institutions, and it also maintained a dialogue with its ancestral traditions, accumulating various layers of meaning. This cultural expression gathers different arrangements and interests, sometimes conflicting, between the different artists, art centres, gallerists, museums, curators and collectors. Anthropologist Ilana Seltzer Goldstein underlines the paradox that the “same country, whose colonial policy was extremely racist and violent, is giving so much space to aboriginal cultures in the museums, and creating policies supporting indigenous arts”. (And that this public support) “*Maybe is an attempt to answer and compensate this obscure and not-so-far past. At the same time, it fits perfectly into the national project to build an identity of its own for Australia that would differentiate it from England*” [2]. And she queries why in Brazil it does not practically exist any acknowledgment of indigenous arts, and if a similar policy would be possible and desirable to take place among us. On the other hand, in the Andean countries, the debate around decolonial aesthetics is very present [3] – as for example the proposition of Anibal Quijano, Walter Mignolo, among others – based on traditional and ancestral cultures, as condition of criticism and contraposition to colonial modernities since the end of the 15th century until the current globalisation.

In Brazil, Garcia dos Santos reminds us that “Brazilian art and culture had already tried to elaborate, within the modern Western matrix, its specific difference as tropicality, through Oswald de Andrade’s Anthropophagy in the 1920s, through the tropicalism in the 1960s, and through Hélio Oiticica’s revolutionary and complex work, that knew how to break with the persistent oppositions erudite art/popular art; European art/non-European art, international art/local environment, etc.” if art criticism in Brazil has had an important historical function in the constructions of “Brazilian identities” along the 20th century, soaked in this modern Western matrix as ex-centric modernity [4], still reproducing an internal colonialism (that reproduces the presupposition of the “Western” and his “Other”) that devastates the country since the modernism with a supposed centrality between Rio de Janeiro and Sao Paulo.

The discourse of “global art” and its institutionalisation in museums and market are intrinsic to the Western matrix, still predominant globally, but since 2008, with the financial crisis and new geopolitical configurations, a crisis of these paradigms is taking place. Is this crisis opening breaches for new articulations and understandings, in particular for Brazil? We have a vast reunion of repertoires, experiences and observations at the same time that there is the transformation into something new... Are these new external forces helping us to reexamine or reifying the paradoxes, the confusions and the semantic missteps in Brazil? Our model of developmentalism and progress at any cost has undermined the traditional and ancestral communities and our natural environment. Is it possible to have a discourse of Brazilian art capable of formulating the problems and making explicit the current forces at work? Which discourses are present? Which mechanisms are operating? Which critical systems are we using? Which diagrams of alterity are capable of confronting the market? How to articulate, to draw closer other matrices? How to invert the cognitive relations?

In May 2011, a Paulistan newspaper presented the first and only indigenous rap band in Brazil, Brô MC's^[5], from Mato Grosso do Sul. The band teaches us, with its cognitive inversion, that “this possibility of coexistence and superposition of different worlds that do not mutually exclude each other is the lesson still to be learned with the art from Amerindians”^[6], the art as an art to build worlds.

[1] LAGROU, Els. *Arte indígena no Brasil: agência, alteridade e relação* [Indigenous art in Brazil: agency, alterity and relation], Belo Horizonte: C/Arte, 2009.

[2] GOLDSTEIN, Ilana Seltzer, *Pintura aborígine contemporânea: do sagrado ao mercado* [Contemporary aboriginal painting: from the sacred to the market], presented at the 27th Brazilian Meeting of Anthropology, August 2010, Belém, Pará, Brazil.

[3] Vide Walter Mignolo, *Desobediencia Epistémica* [Epistemic Disobedience], Buenos Aires, Ediciones del Signo. 2010 ; ed. Walter Mignolo & Arturo Escobar *Globalization and the Decolonial Option*, Routledge, London & New York 2010 ; among others.

[4] Term by Beatriz Sarlo. In: *Una modernidad periférica: Buenos Aires 1920 y 1930* [A peripheric modernity: Buenos Aires 1920 and 1930], Buenos Aires: Ariel, 1988.

[5] See <http://periferiaemovimento.wordpress.com/2011/05/25/no-estado-os-pioneiros-do-rap-indigena/>

[6] LAGROU, Els. *Arte indígena no Brasil: agência, alteridade e relação* [Indigenous art in Brazil: agency, alterity and relation], Belo Horizonte: C/Arte, 2009.

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