

## **Dig spaces, reveal contexts: What do the modes of production in art have to do with the political sphere?**

**Milene Duenha | Junior Romanini**

State University of Campinas | Campinas, SP, Brasil.

muduenha@yahoo.com.br | ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-2316-0408>

DOI: 10.20396/conce.v8i2.8656483.

Submitted: 31/08/2019 | Accepted: 07/12/2019 | Published: 20/12/2019.



### **Abstract**

What is up to art face to a Brazilian context, in a burned Latin America, either by literal fire or by the desire for death? Digging space in container systems of subjectivities and paying attention to the potential of collective incidence that these doing carries, seems to us a possible way. Through a cartographic approach, this article discusses the relations between ethics, aesthetics and politics, highlighting the co-determinancy between these spheres in favor of life potency. To this end, the look at the actions of artists Regina José Galindo and Arthur Barrio offers examples of the intersection between art and public life. Authors such as Baruch Spinoza, Vladimir Safatle, Georges Didi Huberman, and Walter Benjamin are referred to in this discussion.

### **KEYWORDS**

Body in art. Ethic. Political.

### **Cavar espaços, revelar contextos: o que os modos de produção em arte têm a ver com a esfera do político?**

### **Resumo**

O que cabe à arte diante de um contexto Brasil, em uma América Latina incendiada, seja de fogo literal, seja de desejo de morte? Cavar espaço em sistemas contentores das subjetividades e atentar-se ao potencial de incidência coletiva que esse fazer carrega, nos parece um caminho possível. Por uma abordagem cartográfica, o presente artigo discute as relações entre ética, estética

### **PALAVRAS-CHAVE**

Corpo em Arte. Ética. Político.

e o político, destacando a co-determinância entre essas esferas em favor da potência de vida. Para tanto, o olhar para as ações dos artistas Regina José Galindo e Arthur Barrio oferece exemplos de intersecção entre arte e vida pública. Autores como Baruch Spinoza, Vladmir Safatle, Georges Didi Huberman e Walter Benjamin são trazidos como referência nessa discussão.

Pottency, aesthetics and subservience have been contradictory in progress in Brazil for a long time. Perhaps, since it was named Brazil face to the colonial enchantment for the ember-colored tree, whose wood remains scattered throughout the European continent. In 2019, the context is different, but not too much. Pau-Brasil was extinct in face of exploratory activity that spanned centuries. Today, Brazil can be considered the condition of the majority of the population that still inhabits this land, which is nobody's land, but of some, who see in themselves the right to burn it. The others have always decided that country nature's fate, including its population. The imposition of a lifestyle and the erasure of existence forms that are 'inappropriate' to the standards of those who call themselves stronger was given / gives in a violent way. In view of the rigidity, impositions and risk of death, the creation of cracks, of means to life perseverance is a spark to be highlighted. How can this happen? By the perception of the powers that turn the body in ember and, combined, might insurgente inflame this country of continental dimension brasil.

There are countless contradictions and paradoxes presented to the senses when we pay attention to the Brazilian reality - and, more extensively and due to many similarities of subordination, to the Latin America. In the current living conditions, at the same time that an unstoppable inventive power gets revealed face to the restrictions on different ways of life, the subjectivities gets squashed by a biopolitical or necropolitical force, as brought by the philosopher and political theorist Achille Mbembe (2015), expanding Michel Foucault's theory by observing a political and social logic that defines who has the right to life and who should die, according to parameters linked to the maintenance of pottency positions. How can the field of artistic practice get held on to the inventive pottency and produce reverberations in bodies that incorporate the colonial subservience, dragged along the centuries to define who lives and who dies in certain territories? The Philosopher Peter Pál Pelbart (2003, p. 23) reminds:

invention is not the prerogative of great geniuses, nor the monopoly of industry or science, it is the power of the common man. Each variation, no matter how small it is, when propagated and imitated becomes a social quantity, and thus can give rise to other inventions and new imitations, new associations and new forms of cooperation. In this affective economy, subjectivity is not an ethereal effect or superstructure, but a living force, social quantity, psychic and political potency.

How can we activate our ungovernable potency face to a container scenario, which affects subjective production at its deepest stage? The residual struc-

ture of colonialism in Brazil continues to produce individuals who are ignorant of their collective strength, which includes an unbelievable passivity face to the many historical accidents that assiduously consume the most fragile existences. Art is responsible for the production of cracks in subjective sediments in order to provoke, between the clefts, the emergence of a perceptual multiplicity that does not allow the bodies, Brazil in hot coals and the world, to remain the same, to reiterate an extraction system of the forces of all that is alive.

From these interspersed spaces, furrowed by resistant forces, it is necessary to turn these cracks in large clefts, dug by corps *in art* that, by recognition of the potency of the territories in which they live, build other ways of life. In these bodies - of art and of the environment - is revealed an ecology, a logic of interdependence and a transformation between environment and organism. Thus, what we are looking at here is the positioning and reverberations of these bodies in art at their multiplicity of vector exchanges, between the one that engages and the environment that receives it, without disregarding the inventive potency that exists there.

The ground we stepped in this writing, Latin America in its many contrasts, emerges as a closer look at the landscape-house inhabited by the performer Regina José Galindo and the visual artist Arthur Barrio. In other words, if this work proposes to operate on the edges between art and life in performance, artistic action arises from the investigation of / in their own land, as a kind of topographical genealogy, a way of being in which these artists courses - here understood not only as displacement but also as a refined investigation - through that territory in search of retro-traces.

### **Modes of relation between ethics, aesthetics and politics**

The ethics brought to this discussion is based on Spinoza's philosophy (Ethics, 2009 [1677]) and refers to changing principles, situated, which focus on being in the world in relation, and not to a set of rigid conduct rules. It is amplified by the idea that the action of one reverberates in the collective dimension. For this reason, ethics and the dimension of the political are in a co-determinant relation, since the political, as a collective dynamic that has yet the dissent in operation, is produced by the units that configure it, guided by ethical principles. In contrast, a notion of representative politics is guided by the institutional logic (often hierarchical) that represents the collective sphere. The political scientist Chantal Mouffe (2005, p. 9) is the one who presents this

distinction between political and politics, highlighting that the “political” says about the complexity of social relations in which differences and antagonisms coexist and “politics” is linked to that what organizes human coexistence taking into account their divergences and conflicts

And what does aesthetics have to do with it? Aesthetics is understood as poetic production invented in the relations of being in / with the world in a regime of sensitive experience, producing sensitive experience, the *aisthesis*. Thus, when we think about production in art, these three dimensions are intertwined in order to show that art, as an area of knowledge, does not develop outside the context in which it is inserted. The notion of representation, as what circumscribes and enunciates something, appears as a mode of operation in art, which does not exclude its tangibility characteristic.

In the film *Le Carrosse d'or* by filmmaker Jean Renoir (1952), an Italian mambembe company makes a foray into a Spanish colony in Latin America, in the XVII century, telling a love story linked to the context. In this story, three different men fall in love with the young actress of the company, one of them is the political representative who sends for her a golden carriage, the other is a young Spanish officer who declares that for his love he will be able to expel the Indians becoming a hero, and the third is a famous bullfighter who offers to share his fame with the young actress. A very clear example of the colonial relation appears in this context. The researcher and theater critic José Antonio Sánchez (2012, p. 181) when referring to this film to deal with the relation between the idea of representation in art, and representation in politics, states that:

What is at stake in the Golden Carriage [author emphasis] is who best represents its people. Whether the political representative, the viceroy<sup>1</sup> or the actress. We could say that in one case there is a representation related with the law, with guaranteeing rights, making political decisions and in the other case there is a representation related to affectivity, with behavior, even concerns to fragility. The question is how this representative, who is a representative of rights, may be tempted to also be a representative of affections and identities. Or the other way: how can this representative of identities and affections be tempted to also be a representative of rights<sup>2</sup>.

<sup>1</sup> *El Virrey* (viceroy) is a Spanish word that designates an administrative figure responsible for governing in the name of the Spanish crown.

<sup>2</sup> “Lo que está en juego en *La carroza de oro* es quién representa mejor al pueblo. Si el representante político, el virrey, o la actriz. Podríamos decir que en un caso hay una representación que tiene que ver con la ley, con la garantía de derechos, la toma de decisiones políticas y en otro caso hay una representación que tiene que ver con la afectividad, con el comportamiento, que tiene que ver incluso con la fragilidad. La cuestión es cómo este representante, que es el representante de los derechos, puede tener la tentación de ser también representante de los afectos y de las identidades. O a la inversa: de qué modo este representante de las identidades y los afectos puede tener la tentación de ser también representante de los derechos”.

Sánchez's analysis invites us to think about the relation between ethics, aesthetics, political and politics, and how much the artistic production, considering these issues, has an impact on the surrounding reality. If there is a possibility of taking responsibility for what happens on a scale that exceeds the proportion of the private, that possibility lies in becoming aware of the co-determinancy between the factors that conforms a society.

The three dimensions: ethics, aesthetics and politics, when considered and set in motion in artistic production are able to bring out what the performer Tania Bruguera (2016) calls politics as affection. By bringing her reference to Cuban production, Bruguera asks: how to transform affection into political effectiveness and how to make art that can be accessed by more people? Here the artist considers politics as a dimension of the collectivity (not bringing the differentiation raised by Mouffe (2005), as previously exposed).

In view of Bruguera's provocation, it should be noted that the fact that there is no distance between art/artist and the environment, between collective issues and individual actions, makes artistic production an agent with a potential impact on its environment. The cracks that its performance can cause are beyond an intangible field. The curator of the São Paulo Biennial in 2014, Charles Esche, affirmed the need to produce an "art tool", which in fact puts in question ethics implications. For him (2014, n / p), art too is not just a symbolic, utilitarian art, but it is in "close relation with the real world ", focusing on it. Esche also observes that the art that seems more potent, in view of the social framework that has been configured, is that which deals with the notion of planetary existence and the complexity of the relations between the experience of the human race, "a discussion that takes into account the environmental conditions in which we live and the harshness of the history of a given place "(ESCHE, 2014, s / p).

The philosopher Bojana Kunst (2015), on the other hand, affirms that an art with social relevance would not be linked to the idea of utility, neither that one of direct conflict with the system, because that would take it out of the field. Many initiatives in this area end up co-opted by an economic system that can comprehend, even, what questions it self, and that reduces its effectiveness in the political sphere. For this philosopher, the option would be to make use of abstractions that allow the system (in this case, the capitalist) to be preserved. Finding the gaps to trigger the affective dimension, can be one of the ways of

being an *ethiclaestheticpolitical* tool. At this point must be recapture a characteristic of art, which is the articulation of the sensitive, the potential to poetically handle our inventiveness, excavating, spilling, revealing inverses that do not fit in systems, which free the body/thoughts from a servile relation, being a strange tool (alluding to the title of Alva Noë's Noë<sup>3</sup> book), this art that serves no purpose, is an agent of social transformation.

## Body

Freedom is a term treated in the philosophy of Baruch Spinoza (Ética, 2009 [1677]) that conditions it to the knowledge of the affections capable of increasing or decreasing the bodies' potency to act. The more is known about affections, the more likely it is to restrain those who de-potentialize life. This philosopher affirms the body in its potential to affect and be affected by other bodies (referring here to human or non-human bodies). We can say that affections is what produce bodies - individual and collective - thus, getting known them is also a mean of persevering life in its different dimensions.

The philosopher Vladimir Safatle (2016, p. 20) remains that "the body is not only the space in which affections are produced, it is also the product of affections. The affections build the body in its geography, in its regions of intensity, in its responsiveness". He also says that "there is no politic without incorporation, because only one body can affect another body. We inhabit the political field as embodied subjects and, therefore, as subjects in a regime of affection" (Safatle, 2016, p. 95). However, what has fueled this body? What are the entities that stick to it? How is it possible that an ethics of joy, the one that enhances existence, as Spinoza (Ética, 2009 [1677]) brings, to embody it?

For Safatle (2016, p. 96), a "disembodiment of the fantastical nature of the body of power" is necessary. We would say that this body of power is not a phantom, it is information that has already permeated, that resides in the body, in the belly (the king is in the belly) and that it would be necessary to wash it with strong substances that would *dis-organize* it, by *dis-measure*. The substances are those cloudy liquids (sometimes intoxicating) that art offers. The embodiment of the aesthetic experience (in *aisthesis* regime) can mobilize the bodies, either in the subtlety that requires the most refined modes of perception, or in the presentation of the struggle that human existence strives

<sup>3</sup> The full title of the book published by Hill and Wang, 2015 is: "Strange Tools: art and Human Nature".

to produce, either through doses of witchcraft, magic, of imagination, which produces affections, affections and, among the affections, the joy that makes life persevere.

If is there a construction of a political body by affections in a sensitive regime of *aisthesis* and if this is an intimate field of art, what bodies the art has produced? What political body is it being or winning? Does it continue to recruit volunteers with a deaf grip, or does it spread the pottency of non-volunteering, of ungovernability? It may be that art creates a political body of involuntaries, it may refuse to produce a political body due to a more anarchic character that might even question itself about the constitution of something to conform as a body (SAFATLE, 2016, p. . 35). It might be that it involves transforming impotence into impossible, or impossible into potency, however, assuming its position as an agent in this process seems the first thing to do, given the risk of not attend in a situation in which its form of presence that's what fits. It is urgent, as it is “the waiting time that takes away the potentiality inherent to the moment” (SAFATLE, 2016, p. 21).

### **Body of art (to be excavated)**

A naked woman.

Standing in the middle of a lawn. Rest.

The silence is interrupted by the machine-sound of an orange excavator that tarnishes the image: lawn, naked woman and mechanical monster.

The machine digs ditches around the woman's body: the first at the front, the second at the back and then two more, one on each side. All deep.

The woman is an island.

Without water, it is all cliff<sup>4</sup>.

“How did they kill people?” Asked the prosecutor in a courtroom in Guatemala in 2013. “They first ordered the machine operator, Officer García, to dig a hole. Then trucks parked full of people parked in front of Pino and, one by one, passed by ... They didn't shoot. They often put them on with the bayonet. They pulled out their breasts with the bayonet and took them to the pit. When the pit was full, the mechanical shovel was dropped on the bodies”, replied a witness in his testimony at the historic trial against dictator Efraín Ríos Montt, accused of committing genocide against the *Ixil*, indigenous people of Guate-

<sup>4</sup> Text produced from our look at the action *Tierra* (2013), by the Guatemalan artist, Regina José Galindo.



mala<sup>5</sup>.

It is with this testimony that Guatemalan performer Regina José Galindo takes action and performs her video performance *Tierra*<sup>6</sup>, in 2013. For 36 years, since 1954, Guatemala, like other Latin countries, was the site of a genocide that wiped out more than 200 thousand people. Indigenous peoples, accused of supporting the guerrillas against the forced government, were the main persecuted. Civilian patrols and military troops arrived in the villages and destroyed any artifacts that were necessary for the survival of these peoples, in addition to torturing and murdering many bodies that were then deposited in mass graves.



**Figure 1** - Still from the video performance *Tierra*. Regina José Galindo. Image source: <https://www.guggenheim.org/artwork/33096>.. To view excerpts from the video, visit: <https://vimeo.com/234472366>

Borned in 1974, in Guatemala City, during the Civil War, Galindo positions herself in her territory and begins to observe it from the roots; mobile roots in actions that travel around the world. Digging in many lands - a recurring action in her work -, still seems to be a revelation of her affective geography, whether in France, Italy and in the many countries she had been in. Galindo carries Guatemala and the subordination of Latin America with her, in open and deep ditches, as in *Tierra*, the 2013 performance held in Paris.

<sup>5</sup> This text was taken and freely translated from the artist's original text. To consult the original text, access: <http://www.reginajosegalindo.com/>

<sup>6</sup> Available at <http://www.reginajosegalindo.com/>

In authoritarian and negligent systems, there is a lot of nameless body in ditches, there is a lot of history of violence to be excavated and art can be one of the ways to open this crack in the earth and let the memory of death haunt those who allow themselves to exercise decision about the life or death of so many others. According to the final report of the Truth Commission released in 2014<sup>7</sup>, during the dictatorial period in Brazil, between 1964 and 1985, 434 dead political disappeared were counted. Violence was distributed in several instances, not only was it practiced by the military, but it was taught and displayed with pride.

André Mesquita (2015), recalls, in his research, the creation of the Guarda Rural Indígena (GRIN) in 1969 which aimed to cover up the numbers of the genocide provoked during the dictatorship during the expropriations in the central-west and northern regions of the country whose sum was 8.350 indigenous people killed. The way they found to stop the flow of numbers was by transforming the Indians into recruits who could, from that place, oppress any case of insurgency to the regime. In a video by Jesco von Puttkamer, on the occasion of the Graduation of the first GRIN class on February 5, 1970, the recruited Indians were presented dressed in uniform and armed in demonstration of the method of torture *pau-de-arara*. The video was discovered in 2012, by Marcelo Zelic, at the Museu do Índio in Rio de Janeiro, during research for the National Truth Commission.



**Figure 2** - Still from the video by Jesco von Puttkamer. Source: <https://www.diariodocentrodomundo.com.br/a-historia-sinistra-das-milicias-indigenas-treinadas-pelo-exercito-para-torturar-indios/>

<sup>7</sup> Available at: <http://cnv.memoriasreveladas.gov.br/index.php/outros-destaques/574-conheca-e-acesse-o-relatorio-final-da-cnv>

The gap that the Portuguese-Brazilian artist Arthur Barrio produces during this period is by another way of excavation, bringing to the surface the covered deaths, the muggle bodies of meat that remain on the margin. The worthless lives can suddenly become agents

Barrio begins to handle different materials on a piece of white sheets: blood, decomposing meat, bones, clay, rubber foam, cloth, cable (ropes), knives, bags, chisels, himself experiencing, na almost direct contact with the materials, unless for a rubber glove. This was the preparation of his emblematic *Trouxas Ensanguentadas ( Bloody Bundle)*, an urban intervention that was part of the programming of one of the most important art-guerrilla<sup>8</sup> events of the dictatorial period in Brazil. *Do Corpo à Terra*<sup>9</sup> brought together many Brazilian artists, from different languages, who occupied public spaces in Belo Horizonte. The *Trouxas (Bundle)*, from Barrio, were arranged in the Arrudas stream/sewer bed, in the National Park, on April 20, 1970. There were 14 body bundles scattered. According to the event's curator, Frederico Morais, Barrio's intervention attracted an "enormous" audience, creating an "unbearable tension, heated by the arrival of the Fire Brigade and the Police" (MORAIS, 2001). The action was registered anonymously among the curious and, months later, that same year, the video would integrate *Information*, a concept art exhibition in New York. Under the censorship of the darkest period of the dictatorship, the AI-5, Barrio's boldness exposed the blood that flowed under the doors of the military basements.

<sup>8</sup> In the concept of "guerrilla art", there was an approach by the artist na gerrilla's action. According to Morais, this artist was in charge of creating indefinite situations, which caused a strangeness: "The Artist, today, is a kind of guerrilla. Art is a kind of ambush. Acting unexpectedly, where and when it is least expected, in an unusual way (...) the artist creates a permanent state of tension, a constant expectation. Everything can become art, even the most banal daily event ". (MORAIS, 1970, p.2)

<sup>9</sup> The event "Do Corpo à Terra" became a landmark in Brazilian art, whose manifestations or situations proposed by the artists took place in significant public spaces in the city of Belo Horizonte, such as the Municipal Park, Ribeirão Arrudas and Serra do Curral, in addition to promote interventions on the street, in front of the Palácio das Artes<sup>25</sup>. *Do Corpo à Terra* was part of the exhibition *Objeto e Participação* of the *Semana da Vanguarda*, held in April 1970. It was organized by Mari' Stella Tristão, coordinated by Frederico Morais and sponsored by Hidrominas, an organ of the government of the State of Minas Gerais, to celebrate the inauguration of the Palácio das Artes and the *Semana da Inconfidência*. (DELLAMORE, p.155)



**Figure 3** - Situation TE -Trousas Ensanguentadas ( Bloody Bundle) Artur Barrio, 1970. Instituto Inhotim, Brumadinho. Photo: César Carneiro.

In Barrio's turnover of the land, to the emerge from those murdered and abandoned bodies - represented here by their TE - the excavation is toned by the evocation of political and social marks of his territory. Digging is then a transposing action to get to an archaeological process, in the approximation with the past.

However, in this exercise of excavating, language would be both the place where it happens, a "have-place", and the instrument of that excavation. "Have-place", for the thinker Georges Didi Huberman (1998), can be understood as an event - an inseparability between agent, action and result, in which each time (present, past and future) of a work persists in the other, involving and being feed by themselves. Therefore, it is a matter of looking at this excavation, as Didi-Huberman suggests in *Ser Crânio* (2009, p. 53), for a "state of presence" or a "nascent state", where the excavation does not happen with a focused look to a remote past that we want to illuminate, or to a future that we intend to reach as an outcome, but rather to an anachronistic encounter of those times that occurs in the present. Experiment while digging.

Walter Benjamin, in one of his aphorisms entitled *Excavating and Reminding* (1997), comments:

Whoever intends to approach your own buried past must act like a man who digs. First of all, you should never fear returning to the same fact, spreading it as spread the Earth, turning it as the soil turns. For "facts" are nothing but layers that only to the most careful exploration deliver what rewards the excavation (BENJAMIN, 1998, p. 239).

In this revolving of the past for the appearance of a state of experience that is evident in the present, this archaeological process distances itself from an attempt to discover the past and approaches a relation with what remains from what has already happened. According to the authors Gabriella Gian-nachi, Nick Kaye and Michael Shanks, in the book *Archeologies of Presence* (2012), this way of looking at archeology has been used in the anthropology of performance and in the construction of the past in memory, narrative, collec-tions (from textual sources and materials), files and documentation systems, on site experience.

When we look at the actions of Galindo and Barrio, for example, “have--place” means marking the ground with lime, building, destroying and rebuild-ing new frontiers that, each time they are remade, reveals it to themselves. The brazilian geographer Milton Santos, in distrust of what has been named “global village”, draws attention to what is local, to “the cut-outs of the world within the body of the world” (HISSA, 2009, p.37 ). Therefore, to recognize the territory is to recognize yourself in/of it. Ahead, it is a way of being in relation, of subjects who recognize their place - their cut out of the world - but pierces any nearby wall to breathe with the environment, as presented by geographer Cássio Eduardo Viana Hissa:

The world is not outside the subjects of the world, the citizens. It is within everyone, just as it is in communities or social places. Given this, it could not cause strangeness, put the question in these terms, the observation that the construction of an epistemo-logy of existence inevitably would approach to an epistemology of places (2009, p.38).

This epistemology of places brought by Hissa is not possible without the individuals who live there. Therefore, subjects and places exist in co-determi-nancy. The geographer also warns of the mutilations brought about by an evi-dent social apartheid that started to divide the societies from nature. Modern rationality has for a long time engaged a process of externalizing nature which, through this filter, has come to be called as natural resource. It is, therefore, a place of extraction, from external of me, from something out there that I step to explore “as a resource” and not “as an essential good” of which I am a part (HISSA, 2009, p.39).

In this detachment process, human and environment, in the exacerba-tion of the rational, with what body does this subject put himself in relation? In the dichotomy established by the exploratory movements, which body ope-

rates in these cut-outs of the world? Whether digging and leaving exposed the ditch of the violated body, or removing the body from the depths, the work of art does not fail to mark the terrain. It is for life as well as many other means of defense against it, against the atrocities of authoritarian systems, revealing meats, bones and the rottenness trail it leaves.

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