

art | another political intrusion for development

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The text I present here reflects a partial vision on the transversal project that the cultural movement “Identidades” promotes in the community Conceição das Crioulas, in Pernambuco's *sertão*, Brasil. The impulse to this personal reflection springs out of an intense uneasiness towards the role and implication of arts in the field of differentiated development and of the political space engaged with the social. I focus the analysis on intervention in public space – Intervenção Artística em Vila União – questioning western artistic practices frequently innocent and absent from the communicational relations with the people¹.

“The word Art is scary. Or at least it inspires some respect.” (Dionísio, 1997: 3²)

1. The word 'development' is scary. Even more so.

We have sunk into the idea of development as strictly economical, which was outstanding in its original time of the industrial revolution, and in these neoliberal capitalist days is even more so. In the last years, the designation 'developing countries', or others of the kind, has been defining the outlines of the area of power, presenting the condescension that every person can become a part of the 'powerful' sphere. However, clearly hierarchical relations and gaps remain and are deepened. A single voice is founded, a financial shadow discourse of a world where catastrophic inequalities perpetuate.

Not distracted at all with the spectacle promoted by dominant countries, Conceição das Crioulas, a small territory lost in Brazilian *sertão* (i.e. hinterland), fights for its development. Which one? The transversal and human one. Or, if we deconstruct the portuguese word 'des-envolvimento', it suggests the liberation or way out of processes that entangle the human being and stop him/her from their full accomplishment as individual, social and environmental beings. (José Pedro Barata, n.d. in Amaro, 1990)

2. It could only be in Conceição das Crioulas

Conceição das Crioulas is a quilombola community³ with whom the “intercultural movement Identidades” has a strong connection since 2003. A pearl in the Brazilian *sertão*, it lodges in itself a very special personal and collective experience. It is about both of these factors that I am here presenting my reflection.

Emerging from the collective consciousness, both global and political, in 2000 they founded an association: Associação Quilombola de Conceição das Crioulas (AQCC). This community association directs its actions towards the organization of the struggles of the community. It sprang from the need to intensify the right of common well being of the population, and designs the development of the community. These are the main associative and communitarian goals. AQCC focuses its discourse in the fight for its survival, mainly through the retrieval of land. It potentiates the construction of quilombola identity, based on the awareness of the reality and history of black people, enslaved in Brazil in the past. They have before them the challenge of building a just and egalitarian society and of breaking prejudices and racial discrimination.

In that way, Crioulas are set free, building a development which was not predicted or pre-formatted but freely chosen. In this process they demand the plural, the multiple, the heterogeneous, the differentiated; the never actualized land, the participated voice.

1 There are four more approaches in the project. Firstable José Paiva makes a general framing of the project of inter-relating artists members of the intercultural movement “Identidades” in the social and political context of Conceição das Crioulas. In the field of intromission of new technologies in the community, Tiago Assis thinks about possibilities less absorbed by dominant countries in the technological market. Joana Mateus suggests a critical vision on connections of knowledge, trust and complicity that tend to allow environments of interculturality. Lastly, Mónica Faria develops her reflection about the programs of artistic education in the community's schools, highlighting the relations with the “Political-Pedagogical Project” of the community, and strategic fronts in the field of the education of leaders of the community.

2 (my translation from Dionísio, 1997:3)

3 Quilombo designated a place of refuge of slaves in Brazil. Most of them were black people. Today quilombos are communities mixed with indigenous peoples, concentrated in their fight for their rights and freedom.

3. displace(me)

It is in this context that the process of 'intellectual and physical displacement' to this intrinsic, fascinating experience, comes to be. It takes me to an exercise of dialogue moved by the surrounding unrestness and frustration. This dialogue promotes a critical, plural and political thinking, and yet a common one. One that is capable of a wider understanding, in the intercultural and non coincidental confrontation, the Art field seems to gain a sense for existing in the displacement.

In my continuous ontological construction, Art and Culture are the specificity that determines my being. I usually say, even if unsatisfied, that this western navel of mine is a bombastically formatted vision. Displacement allows openness and consciousness of the geometry of other points of view over the world, its *manera*, but also of its own specific and global place in the political, economical and social context. Displacement also seems to initiate frustrations capable of opening the eyes to urgent revision of Art and imponent and imposing cultures. Building other cultures, by the way, with others.

'Art, Proper and Docile/to Art itself, to artists, to gallery owners, to art critics, to art teachers, to museums, to collectors, to editors/look at yourselves in the mirror!/Art also not very proper or improper, and even intractable.'
(Rainho, 2011:5)

4. Art, Proper and Docile: take care!

Contemporary Art, it is important to clarify, is aware of the demanding of world guidelines in favour of approaching alterity, diversity, sustainability, peripheries, participation... it has attached itself to these tendencies, in an uncritical way, or, if critical, in a non-interventionist way. According to the mechanisms of Art, these experimental practices, marginal, continuous (and, maybe because of that, intractable) and improper, are allowed, consented and tolerated.

However, we know of the impossibility of coinciding, on the same side, certain practices and their own 'consecration' in the world of Art. So, what this text modestly aims, is to understand and reflect on an probably consented but not consecrated experience. Defying and continuous, this practice of a group of artists with a small community in the heart of the Brazilian 'sertão', is the ideal context to test my distrust of the claims of 'Art without borders', 'Art without territories'. In this precise moment I could draw limits, prescriptions, and prejudices of artistic practice and theory, as well as of its institutionalization and commodification. It seems to me that in the authorial field, but obviously affective, we feel an art without an inside or an outside, and so western oriented that it becomes febrile and closed. In this to-and-for, artists review their sense, their non-function, their impermanence.

Here we are, at Vila União!

Having set my personal unrestnesses and the world of art on the table, I think about the impossibility of an innocent practice of art. I think of controversies tangent to poetic and aesthetic discourse, articulating with the capacity of externalizing convictions, and political and utopian engagements of the author.

In the displacement into sertão, specifically Conceição das Crioulas, we can smell the dilution of the concept of Art, since the need to test its wideness is established, controversial pole relating to its specific field. The contradictions of our routines of thinking and doing in art, where westernisms and capitalism are embedded, come to the surface.

5. 'Artistic intervention in Vila União'

5.1. 'mutirão'⁴, representation and collective image

'Artistic intervention in Vila União' is a project following the flow of warm lands, which counts several seasons and will count many more, in mutirão works. It emerges of a disquietude which is common to the group of artists of the 'intercultural movement Identidades', and to the community, Conceição das Crioulas, in relationships of knowledge, trust and complicity. The project came to be during a joyful chat in the summer of 2008, in a meal in Vila União. A family lunch with the friends of 'Identidades' stimulated the telling of the

4 Collective initiative to help someone, for mutual aid or for a community service.

stories of the beginnings and motivations of the village. The place where Vila União is, from a geographical point of view, is a prolonged arm of one of the exits of the central village of Conceição das Crioulas. The name Vila União (Union Village), results from an undertaking of the community uniting efforts to solve a serious problem of Chagas disease which was spreading death and illness among the population. Once detected the problem – Chagas disease was disseminated by an insect that reproduces itself in the holes of the raw soil used in – people knew their houses had to be built anew, this time using fired bricks. Mobilizing state support, women organized to collect the clay, make the bricks, build up walls and roofs, conquering their tenacity and men's participation. That's how Vila União was born. Today this place is one single unpaved street, flanked by approximately 70 houses, some of them without plaster not painting, both inside and outside.

To us, the magic and mobilization could repeat. And why not? Creativity and artists have often a dissident, divergent, bold thinking, and desire added to these, rapidly transforming the challenge in a shared project. 'Artistic intervention in Vila União' intends to reunite the population towards a participative intervention 'mutirão' to plaster and paint the houses. A participative process, where UNIÃO searched for a symbolic expression, people chose white as the color of the houses. The collective image chosen also determined that the street will have a fresh identity image with a strong stand in the landscape. The work will be prolonged in the creation and execution of an identity symbol to paint in the outside walls of each family house. The process of collecting stories, elements and images to paint in the walls has already started and is performed by the community.

Each house will be painted in white and in this way it will be integrated in the landscape of the street. At the same time each house will also have its own visual elements allowing its distinction from the other houses. These elements bring in an interesting exercise for representation, the challenge to bridge orality and visuality and to represent a family understood also in its belonging to a collective.

We will move from the orality of stories, through shared and recognized memory and also family lineage, to the configuration of visual elements – pregnant of representative senses – in the aesthetic and subjective domain. This work will involve the project "Artistic expressions in the schools of Conceição das Crioulas", children and teachers will develop the visual and graphical elements of each family, which will be painted in the continuum of the houses' walls, and they will also collect the history of each family to be edited in a monograph of the village.

'Every person and every collective has the right to free production, free management, circulation and exhibition of their own cinematographic image' (Tudurí, 2008:7⁵)

5.2. Communitarian group for video production

In parallel to the preparation and execution of the project "Artistic intervention in Vila União", the collective "Crioulas Video", a communitarian group for video production, will produce a documentary. It will register and debate the work process, decision making, execution, and, finally, the first transformations of Vila União. This competence of documenting brings with it the possibility of symbolically eternalize the mutirão, the phenomenon of transforming the landscape of Vila União, its own capacity of representing itself which is intrinsic to this action (on one hand through the visual elements in the front walls and on the other hand through the video images).

The collective Crioulas Video has become autonomous out of a workshop that the community asked to the 'intercultural movement Identidades in 2005.

The community association AQCC, convinced of the strength and potential for subverting power relations frequently attached to discourse and image, guaranteed a structure capable of supporting the new group. The group is determinant in creating, from the starting point of the community, a very specific representative image of a unitary identity but also of a complex one, revealing the voice of its people.

As a consequence this group created the opportunity for the community to build and disseminate its own stories. My work experience shared with this group has planted in me the seed of complexity, of a deep political awareness. I think that Conceição was, in fact, where people and site made me learn the center of the discursive power telling their own story, generating shades and slips in the tendentious universalisms of History.

It is important to explain here, that, before the strength and power of detaining and defending the community own path, there are contradictions in the strategic plans of the AQCC and in the lives of men and women of this

arid territory.

In the inter-knowledge that we allowed ourselves in (only possible through complicity and trust), the controversies in collective stands have become more visible, as well as my own controversies. While the demand of unity is very strongly stated in political reinforcement of identity, in everyday life there is considerable space to deal with the plurality that constitutes the community.

The young video makers are autonomous for some years now. That communitarian video group, besides their commitment with the community, has transferred multiple abilities and tools to other quilombola communities. Their videos present a communitarian discourse, they underline the political strategy of AQCC, they respond to state commissions (and therefore they generate revenue) and also they function as self defense evidence against possible offenses to quilombola territory.

According to our vision and expectations, there could be a more expressive, plastic, narrative or fictional exploration in their works. But we know we have to suspend this wish and act according to spontaneous and empirical languages that emerge from their work. Still, this group has been awarded with national and international prizes and their videos have been in Recife TV, the state capital city.

Lastly, after this collective success in arid lands, we hope that more and more the camera will be intruding in the streets of the communities, in activities, people, and in that way, this tool will release possibilities of visual and political discourse, and, most of all, will be a vehicle of the experience of culture and knowledge. In Conceição it is already clear that video allows the eternally symbolical register of the struggle, of every conquest, of everyday resistance, capacities that are adjacent to the notions of extreme social realisms in the 21st century introduced by Tudurí (2008).

6. aesthetics of the collective. Art or politics?

I would like to underline here that this is a project for communitarian mobilization and organization, taken forward also as an aesthetic stand. "Artistic intervention in Vila União" extends in the time of relations, coming from far away and prolonging itself in the community's struggle for a collective identity, the improvement of life standards and reinforcement of a common political awareness. It contains a work in a namby-pamby rhythm, sprawled in the resistant ?time, slowly moving forward. A theoretical reflection, and critical thinking about the possibilities of art to tune with culture and the life of communities, already overflows. In this small village, Vila União, whose origin reveals a past and present strong potential, the initiative of women becomes predominant (even if it involves the whole population), in the establishment and participation in democracy. It is therefore a fertile land to communal participative practices, positioned according to the political notion of social antagonism, of the presence of a conflict producing, simultaneously, sense and action.

We would be talking about artistic collectives or citizenship imaginaries, about politics.

That is another play of contradictions. Even if it was so, what kind of political actions are they? Art or politics? Being a community whose common direction is a goal and a weapon, are these cultural actions serving politics? And what service is this, since it is composed of the strength of sharing the sensible, of common emotions, of the 'magic' of aesthetics in its capacity to interact?

Certainly we venture, in Conceição das Crioulas, to aestheticize politics, cultural politics of spectacular magic, leaving aside political enthusiasm – that one specifically maintained in this community. I repeat: political enthusiasm. This is the newness of such an outlying concept of Art.

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