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Some Notes on the Contamination and Quarantine of Brazilian Art

This essay seeks to question the characteristics that have come to be celebrated as forming a specific genealogy for Brazilian art. It traces how these very same characteristics have gone from providing the diagnosis that Brazilian art was the product of a culture suffering from a seemingly incurable malaise, to one in which it is seen to be thriving and dynamic, constituting its very own genealogy not despite but precisely because of its inherent hybrid or (as I will posit) contaminated nature. I will argue that within this new understanding of Brazilian contemporary art and its specific genealogy there exists a conflation of cartography, political history, and the praxis of art that is not without its own problematics.

The art critic Paulo Sergio Duarte begins his survey entitled The 60s: Transformations of Art in Brazil by proposing a visit to an imaginary museum. This is not André Malraux's "musée imaginaire,"1 but very much a traditional one; as Duarte himself stresses, it is one that could be located in the United States, Europe, or anywhere else in the world.2

In the first gallery of Duarte's imaginary museum the viewer finds Oldenburg's "huge cushioned plastic hamburger," Warhol's Two Elvis, Jackie Kennedy and Cans of Campbell's Soup, Jasper Johns' Flag, a Roy Lichtenstein comic book painting, and so forth. The second gallery contains work that Duarte considers to be "diametrically opposed manifestations" by Dan Flavin, Carl Andre, Richard Serra, Donald Judd, Robert Smithson, and Joseph Kosuth.3

For Duarte, both galleries, despite their differences, have a commonality that goes beyond the simple fact that all works were produced during the 1960s. Because these works emerged either in opposition to, or as an unfolding of, a previous moment—namely, abstract expressionism—they are considered related genealogies.

Duarte's visitor continues into a third imaginary gallery displaying works from the same period; these works are made distinct by the fact that they were produced in Brazil. The proposed visitor is a layperson who would notice certain similarities between the Brazilian works and those from the two previous galleries, yet, as if announcing the purpose of his book, Duarte also suggests, "we will see that Brazilian art of this period displays differences that lend it a character of its own, even if the layman doesn't notice them."4

Although these differences and similarities are not specified, they are presented as an intrinsic characteristic of the works that, unlike their North American contemporaries, are too

entangled in their genealogical sources to allow for the straightforward separation or categorisation seen in the work of the previous galleries.

This third space is distinct from the works in the previous rooms since it does not possess their common precedent, namely abstract expressionism, which both pop art and minimalism, according to Duarte, stem from and react against. Although the works in this third gallery space are similar, they are connected to another genealogy altogether; according to Duarte, this can be visually verified by the trained eye.

A number of questions emerge from this statement, some productive, others less so. Firstly, the question of what is visually verifiable is problematic if we recall Jean Fisher's accusation that

A rather perverse turn of thought is required that reconceptualises cultural marginality no longer as a problem of invisibility but one of an excessive visibility of a certain order, one based in readily marketable signs of cultural difference, which is itself bound to visuality and the tendency in European thought to equate that which is visually verifiable with "truth."

It is perhaps this excessive visuality of a certain type to which Miguel Lopez refers in the sarcastic question that also serves as the title to his essay, *How Do We Know What Latin American Conceptualism Looks Like?*⁶ This leads to the second problematic that we can draw from Duarte's statement: when it comes to conceptual art, the suggestion of something that is visually verifiable becomes, at least theoretically, difficult to discern.

Kosuth's presence within the predominantly minimalist grouping is therefore telling, as it points towards an art historical development that would lead into the 1970s and thus beyond the scope of Duarte's book. The inclusion of Kosuth among the minimalists seems, on the one hand, to announce that the specificity of conceptual art also pertains firmly to United States genealogies, while on the other hand it points to the fact that the categorisation between minimalism and conceptual art might not be so easily categorisable in itself.

What is established therefore—in my opinion productively, albeit not devoid of its own problematics—is a sense of the specificity of art historical genealogies, or a form of disjunctive conjunction, if we use Peter Osborne's definition of the expression "contemporary art." That is to say, the "contemporary" can be understood as a "coming together of different but equally 'present' temporalities." For Osborne,

This problematically disjunctive conjunction is covered over by straightforward, historicist use of "contemporary" as a periodising term, in the manner in which it is encountered in the mainstream art history—for example, in its stabilisation of the distinction between modern and contemporary art.⁸

Of course, Osborne is not concerned in this particular case with Latin American art, but his critique of the banalisation of the category "contemporary art" and his emphasis on the 1960s as a period of transition or rupture between the temporalities of the modern and the contemporary, has a profound effect on the way in which we understand or interpret art from Latin America.

For instance, the contemporary can be roughly periodised as the successor of the term modern from around 1945; a period which Osborne highlights as

the beginning of the international hegemony of the US art institutions, and thereby of US art itself, of the incorporation of the *waste products* [my italics] of the pre-war avant-garde practices into museums, and the institutional advance of the so-called neo-avant-gardes.⁹

But the contemporary has multiple temporalities, and so Osborne invokes the following disjunction against this periodisation:

Chronologically, this is the broadest periodisation of contemporary art currently in use. It is in various respects too broad, while at the same time being, in others, too narrow. Do we really inhabit the same present, art historically and art critically, as Abstract Expressionism, for example? Alternatively, is the Duchamp of the years of the First World War really so distant from us to fall outside the category of "contemporary art" altogether, as this chronological periodisation is forced to insist?¹⁰

In other words, it was in the 1960s that these two disjunctions within our understanding of the contemporary came together: the first as an origin for a geopolitically specific genealogy; the second as a radically new way in which to understand art, one whose historical spectrum is as broad as modernism itself.

Osborne concludes in a manner that seems to recall already dated Latin Americanist arguments: "Such problems draw attention to the inadequacy of any merely chronological conception of time of art history."11

If the conjunction in the contemporary is the fact of living together in time and in the present, its disjunctive nature is due to the fact that within this "now" there are several distinct and often contradictory ways of apprehending or making sense of this present. These invariably invoke trajectories in time, histories, or genealogies. It is therefore intrinsically fraught to think of Latin American art in terms of derivation, since its presence in the here and now is both conjunctive and disjunctive—in short, it is contemporary.

Despite all the issues that this raises, Duarte's claim that a genealogy specific to Brazilian art exists, contrasts quite sharply from previous considerations. Take Roberto Schwarz, for instance, whose essay Nationalism by Elimination suggested that such visually verifiable association with mainstream movements produced a form of malaise that arises from

derivation.12 If Schwarz claimed that cultural and intellectual trends in Brazil emerged from the constant need to renew oneself in the face of the fads and fashions of the dominant culture, a cynic like myself would understand this condition of relation and separation as equivalent to that of contamination and quarantine. In fact, this proposition is not simply due to my cynicism, it is also a response to the fairly recent construction of a sense of national genealogy within Brazilian art, which we can see was already in the process of consolidation in Duarte's text (from 1998) and has now become a fairly consensual, radical contradiction (at least superficially) of Roberto Schwarz's argument for the Brazilian cultural malaise (originally published in Portuguese in 1986). These recent discourses fit neatly within (or perhaps justify themselves by) the famous 1928 Anthropophagite rhetoric of Oswald de Andrade, which re-emerged as a cultural referent in the mid-1960s and consolidated itself as the crux of national cultural character with the São Paulo Biennial of 1998. Indeed, recent interpretations of Brazilian art that emphasise the "uniqueness" of the Anthropophagite heritage tend to ignore the fact that neither Schwarz nor Duarte are actually wrong but simply complementary, since they collectively describe the disjunctive conjunction that is the basis of the cultural event or artefact within a particular moment in time. If, as Schwarz argues, the trend that is imported does not have time to develop towards its own local logical conclusion before the next trend arrives and displaces it, this process of displacement, or reaction, constitutes a specific genealogy that, as Duarte argues, ultimately informs the local art historical canon or genealogy. The problem arises when this process is taken for something that is essentially and intrinsically Brazilian.

Duarte's third gallery appears to correspond to Homi Bhabha's notion of hybridity as a third space that is the same but not quite the same. In this third space, according to Bhabha, the culture from which the hybrid emerges is a form of musée imaginaire where cultural diversity is created whilst difference is contained.13

Strictly speaking, Bhabha's denomination of the third space presents characteristics between two distinct cultural or geopolitical locations, a space between the dominant and the subaltern, whose agency is not predetermined but can emerge from either of its constitutive elements. However, this positive, reconciliatory role of the hybrid is not without its critics. As Peter Hallward asserted,

the properly postcolonial moment, with Bhabha, is not a time of decision or mobilisation so much as the time-lag opened up by the very enunciation and displacement of ambivalence as such, an ambivalence that relates to nothing outside the field of its articulation.¹⁴

From a cynical point of view, this deferral, or continuous strategy of overcoming which Hallward (not unlike Schwarz) accuses of never accomplishing its task, can be seen to operate within the interpretation of Brazilian contemporary art at an international level through the continuous evocation of Anthropophagy—and its legacy through Tropicalia—as a marker and guarantor of authentic Brazilianness. That is to say, the perception of Brazilian art seems stuck in a process that is said to resist but in fact only repeats the enunciation of its position of resistant, never actually transcending the condition that leads it to resist in the first place.

Hybridity is by no means a new discussion, but it is one that has become implicit in the very subject—the academic discipline of the study of Latin American culture—whose specific bibliographical source can be traced back to Néstor Garcia Canclini.15 Bhabha's ambivalence towards the term is contrasted by Canclini's affirmative use of the notion. Rejecting the claim that modernism in Latin America did not attain the level of cultural purity present in Europe and North America due to the late or incomplete modernisation of the continent, Canclini argued that instead of replacing pre-modern culture, modernity coexists with the vernacular. Within such coexistence, the subaltern, through the process of hybridisation, opens a space of negotiation with the dominant culture while maintaining or affirming a sense of identity through the preservation of local traditions, which are in turn articulated through modernity.

The hybrid within this understanding relies on the canon—that is, the dominant genealogies upon which an identitarian character is superimposed. It is not so much a condition of ambivalence whose agency is always deferred, but rather one where representation emerges as a form of identitarian affirmation in the face of a dominant culture.

The affirmative identitarian vocation of Latin American art that Canclini celebrated seems to have subsided over the last two decades as Latin American art has become integrated as never before within the international contemporary art circuit, leading curators and critics to reformulate, satisfactorily or not, its relation to place and/or its cultural specificity.

Recently, Gerardo Mosquera has argued that the shift in nomenclature from the adjective Latin American to the use of the preposition from Latin America relates to the fact that art from the region now inhabits the world stage, that it has, in other words, bridged the local to become global. He traces how it has transcended its perennial subordinate and derivative position with regard to Western canons to become a voice among many others in the cacophonous, plural and international art circuit.

New artists have broken away from the marriage between art and national or regional IDs that has so much affected art in Latin America. This does not mean that there is no Latin American "look" in the work of numerous artists, or even that one cannot point to certain identifying traits

of some countries or areas. The crucial distinction lies in the fact that these identities begin to manifest themselves more by their features as an artistic practice than by their use of identifying elements taken from folklore, religion, the physical environment or history. This implies the presence of the context and of culture understood in its broadest meaning, and interiorised in the very manner of constructing works or discourses. ¹⁶

Mosquera, seeks to establish a form of historical progression within the hybrid condition of art from Latin America. And it is in the process of making, rather than the association of cultural references, where he sees this taking place:

But it also involves a praxis of art itself, insofar as art, which establishes identifiable constants by delineating cultural typologies in the very process of making art, rather than merely accentuating cultural factors interjected into it. Thus, for instance, contemporary Brazilian art is identifiable more by the manner in which it refers to ways of making art than by the mere projection of contexts.¹⁷

The transition from a certain identifiable "look" (a representation or a projection of contexts) to a "process" (a way of making) is crucial here. If identitarian representation is denied, the persistence of differentiation is not only permitted but also necessary. This is where, for me, the terms contamination and quarantine come to mind, as they also seem to approach Hallward's critique of postcolonialism where he suggests that the ambivalence implicit in the hybrid tends towards singularity rather than specificity. According to Hallward,

A singular mode of individuation proceeds internally, through a process that creates its own medium of existence or expansion [and here Mosquera's reference to artists interiorizing contexts seems coherent], whereas a specific mode operates, through the active negotiation of relations and deliberate taking of sides, choices and risks, in a domain and under constraints that are external to these takings.¹⁸

Although such an approximation deserves more thorough analysis, it does seem to resolve the paradoxical situation in which (according to Mosquera) "artists are less and less interested in showing their passports" while the discourse that legitimises their practices invariably harkens back to those same theories that asserted identity in order to overcome conditions of cultural dependency, in other words, concepts articulated through the notion of hybridity. ¹⁹ Mosquera is thus still compelled to summon theories and manifestos, such as Oswald de Andrade's Anthropophagy and Fernando Ortiz's Transculturation, as well as key thinkers within the postcolonial discourse, such as Homi Bhabha and Gayatri Spivak, in order to purport the singularity (to use Hallward's term) of the genealogy while seemingly denying the specificity (or the relation) that these artistic practices might have with other practices and domains.

Again, from a cynical point of view, contamination is celebrated on the global field of contemporary art as long as a quarantine will keep it (the other) at a safe distance and protect us (the self) from contamination. A paradoxical situation thus emerges where belongingness

is both affirmed and denied. This contradiction lies in the fact that those theories invoked by Mosquera (and many others) belong to a historical moment when to think of an avant-garde in the periphery meant to question the implicit Eurocentrism within the ideal of universality in modern art. They are theories that belong to a modern temporality and are invoked in order to legitimise a contemporary temporality.

Today, with concepts such as the avant-garde generally discredited, the rhetoric that legitimises Brazilian contemporary art, for instance within the global art circuits, invokes those same theories not, as has been argued by Moacir dos Anjos, to overcome a sense of disparity but in order to affirm a particular local accent; or as Mosquera put it, as a way of making art that differentiates itself from other ways. 20 Difference as identitarian affirmation (Canclini's model) has, it seems, been transposed onto the condition of being the same but not quite (Bhabha's model).

If we return to Paulo Sergio Duarte's example of the third gallery, we find that although it contains work that is visually similar, these belong to a genealogy of their own, one which is simultaneously hybrid and autonomous (contaminated but quarantined). If abstract expressionism served as a point of departure for pop art and minimalism, it is in Tarsila do Amaral's 1923 painting A Negra (fig. 1) that Duarte finds a predecessor for the Brazilian work of the 1960s. Tarsila's painting, however, was a conjunction of European abstraction (purism) and the Parisian Negrophilia fad of the 1920s. As a cultural artefact, A Negra can therefore hardly be related to either Canclini's or Bhabha's understanding of hybridity. Translated by the painter into a signifier of Brazilianness (as Mario de Andrade claimed), A Negra appears within the Brazilian hybrid genealogy as the yet unresolved double identification with modernity (represented by the post-cubist aesthetic) and national identity (understood by the painter herself as essentially primitive). There is a crucial distinction here between double identification and double consciousness: the first projects the hybrid onto the other; the second interiorises the hybrid as a problematic condition of the self.21 There is, in other words, a critical distinction between the representation of the other and selfrepresentation; Tarsila's A Negra fits into the former rather than the latter definition. This distinction, which is hardly ever acknowledged, is also a key aspect within the hybrid genealogy of Brazilian art.

Tarsila's A Negra is in this sense a projection of identities other than her own, since it presented European abstraction as the backdrop for the figure of the Brazilian, represented by a naked black woman. Nature (in the shape of a banana leaf) separates foreground from background. The painting thus stands as a hybrid prototype, one which—though its

constitutive parts are not yet resolved or synthesised—already presents a problem that would find its brilliant resolution five years later in Oswald de Andrade's "Manifesto Antropofago," which identified cultural cannibalism as the unavoidable Brazilian condition.

A fundamental change indeed occurred in the transition of Tarsila's painting from prototype to synthesis: in 1928, the black woman (the figure of the wet nurse painted by the wealthy daughter of coffee oligarchs) was transformed into the painting Abaporu (fig. 2), in which the artist invoked a mythical Brazilian pre-Cabralian native.22 Tarsila's passage from the Pau Brasil to the Antropofagia phase of her work, substitutes an unconscious allegory of the economic foundation (the legacy of slavery) of Brazil (which ultimately provided the material conditions for her own existence as a cosmopolitan artist living in Paris) with another allegory, one that revived the Indianist fad of the late nineteenth-century Brazilian academic romantic painters when the native (then already virtually exterminated by the driving forces of modernity) came to represent the nation.

In Tarsila's 1929 painting Antropofagia (fig. 3), both these allegories stand—or more precisely, sit—side by side as if emphasising the transition and confirming Oswald de Andrade's proclamation: We are all Anthropophagists! But who is Oswald addressing? If Tarsila's Antropofagia is anything to go by, one might suppose that Oswald's "we" is directed precisely at those who are absent from the painting, namely the third constitutive, formative ethnicity of the Brazilian people, the white of European descent—in other words, the painting's viewer.

Hybridity is a problematic characteristic with which to form the basis of a genealogy, but not because of any claim of purity in cultural production, authenticity, origin, and so forth, since the driving force of any cultural production lies precisely in its interaction with or contamination by other sources. Hybridity is problematic as a means of identification not because of what it enunciates or what it makes visible but because of what it conceals. If the native became symbolic of the nation during the second half of the nineteenth century, for the modernists it was the mulato or mulata who came to symbolise the Brazilian people. At first this seems to be an honest gaze upon the national ethnic composition. However, the representation of the mulato conceals as much or perhaps more than it makes visible.

Let us consider another type of hybridity, one that, unsurprisingly, is less often celebrated. Modesto Brocos' painting entitled The Redemption of Ham (1895, fig. 4) associates the biblical curse of Ham with blackness of skin by depicting a black grandmother who thanks god for her white grandchild.23 Her mixed-race daughter holds the baby while her white son-in-law looks on at the scene with an air of pride. Although the son-in-law's expression might

simply reflect the natural pride of fatherhood, it may also be read, perhaps more in line with the painting's "message," as the satisfaction brought about by the fruit of his redemptive blood, which was seen as a means of cleansing the nation of its dark—or quite literally, black—past. Given the date of the painting (1895), it is fair to assume that the grandmother would have been only recently freed from slavery (abolished in 1888).

The presence of the father, the poor European migrant rural worker, is significant in associating the nation's redemption with the policy of whitening the population through miscegenation. This was one of the key debates of the time. It connected the abolitionist movement with both the foundation of the republic and the political struggle exercised by the oligarchic land-owning families. The latter adhered to it in order to maintain their power base throughout the political and economic transition from the monarchy to the republic (declared in 1889) and from slave to paid labour.

Within this politico-economic shift, abolitionism in Brazil did not necessarily disentangle the "reconciliation" ideology of Christian belief from the racism that had served to justify slavery. Instead, it drew on the late nineteenth-century pseudo-scientific notion of eugenics, which was devised in Britain by Francis Galton who "adapted" the theories of his cousin Charles Darwin in order to associate physiological (and by extension, ethnic) traits with personality characteristics. The eugenic discourse served abolitionist aims by introducing waged labour as a modernising substitute for slavery. This particular form of modernisation became interesting to the land-owning oligarchic elite who eventually saw economic as well as political benefits in the transition, thus guaranteeing their position of power within the newly established republic. Racist as it is, Brocos' painting nevertheless presents, or represents, hybridity as a fact, one that was inextricably connected with the positivist ideal of the nation's drive towards modernity.

The mulato therefore is not only a product of the ideological modernising drive of the nation (that equated the whiteness of skin with civilisation), the mulato is the actual driving force of the modernity of the nation, the hybrid symbol of the economic transition between sugar cane slave labour and immigrant man power in coffee and beyond. It was only natural that the modernists chose to represent their own aesthetic hybridity through his/her image, but this is not without problems and contradictions, as we can see in Tarsila's A Negra.

The hybrid therefore is not so much foreclosed by the political (Bhabha's ambivalence) but determined by the agency of the elite's politics towards modernity: a discourse that is at the very core of the postcolonial rhetoric. To proclaim hybridity as the overarching characteristic of the genealogy of art in Brazil, or anywhere else for that matter, is to participate in the

construction of an art history based on a myth that reduces culture to the "visually verifiable" while ignoring the possibility of a conjunction of practices and ideas that possess distinct (or disjunctive) genealogies.

It is, in other words, to defer the malaise of derivation by quarantine rather than to diagnose and reveal the symptoms. For those of us who research art and culture from Latin America, our defensiveness towards our subject and our willingness to celebrate, which conceals an inability to be critical and to reveal its more problematic characteristics, seems to me to be the core of the ailment.

Notes

http://www.afterall.org/journal/issue.23/how.do.we.know.what.latin.american.conceptualism.looks.likemiguela.l opez (last accessed 10 February 2015).

¹ André Malraux, *Le musée imaginaire* (Geneva: Skira, 1947).

² Paulo Sergio Duarte, *The '60s: Transformations of Art in Brazil* (Rio de Janeiro: Campos Gerais, 1998).

³ Ibid., 13.

⁴ Ibid., 14.

⁵ Jean Fisher, "Some Thoughts on Contamination" in *Vampire in the Text: Narratives of Contemporary Art*, ed. Jean Fisher (London: InIVA, 1995), 252–257, here 254.

⁶ Miguel Lopez, "How Do We Know What Latin American Conceptualism Looks Like?," *Afterall 23* (Spring 2010),

⁷ Peter Osborne, *Anywhere or Not at All: Philosophy of Contemporary Art* (London: Verso, 2013).

⁸ Ibid., 17.

⁹ Ibid., 18.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Roberto Schwarz, "Nationalism by Elimination" in Roberto Schwarz, *Misplaced Ideas*, trans. and ed. John Gledson (London: Verso, 1992), 1–18.

¹³ Jonathan Rutherford, "The Third Space. Interview with Homi Bhabha" in *Identity: Community, Culture, Difference*, ed. Jonathan Rutherford (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1990), 207–221.

¹⁴ Peter Hallward, *Absolutely Postcolonial: Writing between the Singular and the Specific* (Manchester: Manchester Univ. Press, 2001), xii.

- ¹⁵ Néstor Garcia Canclini, *Hybrid Cultures: Strategies for Entering and Leaving Modernity* (Minneapolis: Univ. of Minnesota Press, 1995).
- ¹⁶ Gerardo Mosquera, "Against Latin American Art" in *Contemporary Art in Latin America*, ed. Phoebe Adler, Tom Howells and Nikolaos Kotsopoulos (London: Black Dog, 2010),12–25, here 22.
- ¹⁷ Ibid., 22.
- ¹⁸ Hallward, Absolutely Postcolonial (cf. note 14), xii.
- ¹⁹ Mosquera, "Against Latin American Art" (cf. note 16), 22.
- ²⁰ Moacir dos Anjos, *Contraditório: Panorama da Arte Brasileira* (São Paulo: Museu de Arte Moderna, 2007).
- ²¹ Double consciousness was a concept developed by W.E.B. du Bois as a way of describing the Afro-American consciousness of inhabiting two cultural worlds at the same time.
- ²² Pre-Cabralian refers to Pedro Alvarez Cabral, the Portuguese Naval officer who "discovered" Brazil.
- ²³ Genesis 9:25 describes the curse of Ham as that of being condemned to be the "servant of servants," leading to the original assumption that the passage justified the subjection of the Canaanites to the Israelites. Later interpretations, with the intention of justifying slavery, identified the curse with the blackness of skin.

Illustrations

- Fig. 1: Tarsila do Amaral, *A Negra*, oil on canvas, 100×81.3 cm, 1923, São Paulo, Museu de Arte Contemporâneo da Universidade de São Paulo (reproduced from: *Art d'Amerique Latine 1911-1968*, Centre Georges Pompidou, 1994, 103).
- Fig. 2: Tarsila do Amaral, *Abaporu*, oil on canvas, 85×72 cm, 1928, Buenos Aires, Museo de Arte Latino-americana (MALBA) de Buenos Aires, Fundación Costantini (reproduced from: Jorge Schwartz ed. *Brasil 1920-1950: De la Antropofagia a Brasilia*, Valéncia: IVAM centre, 2001, 67).
- Fig. 3: Tarsila do Amaral, Antropofagia, oil on canvas, 79×101 cm, 1929, São Paulo, Fundação José e Paulina Nemirovsky São Paulo. (reproduced from: Mostra do redescobrimento: arte moderna, Fundação Bienal de São Paulo, 2000, 93).
- Fig. 4: Modesto Brocos, *The Redemption of Ham (A Redenção de cam)*, oil on canvas, 199 × 166 cm, 1895, Rio de Janeiro, Museo Nacional de Belas Arte do Rio de Janeiro. (reproduced from: *Acervo: Museu Nacional de Belas Artes*, Rio de Janeiro: MnBA, 2002, 80).