

Art and Insurgency in Urgent Times

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Brazil's constitutional crisis that culminated in the impeachment of President Dilma Rousseff in 2016 triggered a series of popular protests throughout the country. Starting with a brief analysis of the current political situation, this text identifies the characteristics, tools and forms of these political protests, drawing connections between them and debates in the arts.

We are living in a period when the decentralized production of non-hegemonic discourses runs counter to the narratives and ideology of mainstream media corporations. Multiple voices and divergent points of view have complicated assessments of the quality of information in circulation and have brought us other modes of political engagement. How are artists performing in this climate of global upheaval? Is it possible to analyse political contexts from the perspective of the arts? What answers or questions can art offer to the political crises around the world?

In Brazil, a series of popular demonstrations starting in 2011 – which I explain below – preceded the protests during the Olympic Games of 2016 and paved the way for demonstrations both for and against the impeachment of President Dilma Rousseff, as well as the Fora Temer (Out Temer) movement (objecting to her replacement as president by Michel Temer, her former vice president), and the occupations of the seats of regional branches of the Ministry of Culture (MINC) and of public schools. These protests add to a long history of political struggles in Brazil. When Félix Guattari travelled around Brazil in the 1980s, he was surprised to discover that Brazilian social movements from that period had difficulty incorporating the micro-political agendas so in vogue in Europe and in the US since at least the 1960s. Instead, leftist Brazilian militants of the time repudiated micro-political agendas (of gender, for example) as petit bourgeois behaviours, individualistic and liberal in character, and therefore not priorities.¹ After 2011, militant youth raised in the sociocultural programmes created during the presidency of Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva (2003–11) and Dilma's first term (2011–14) fuelled the micro-political character of current forms of struggle. Historically, activist youth are the vanguard fighters in political actions, and this new Brazilian generation represents more than simply a group of middle-class white youth with access to universities: it also includes youth from the city's peripheries who are for the most part black.

In 2011, students occupied the main administration building of the University of São Paulo to protest the approval of an agreement between the state and the provost allowing the Military Police to enter the campus. Shock troops from the Military Police employed strong repressive measures, including helicopters, to remove the students. The action was sharply criticized for its violation of constitutional principles of university

autonomy and for disrespecting the historical role of the campus as space for freedom of thought and liberty of expression.

The year 2012 was marked by a national strike at public universities and the violent eviction of residents of the Pinheirinho neighbourhood, located in a rural area of São José dos Campos, São Paulo.² In the following year, the police forced the removal of members of several indigenous groups from the Aldeia Maracanã (Maracanã Village), a historic building they had occupied since 2006.³ In February of that year, following the closing of theatres and cultural centres in the city of Rio de Janeiro, the Movimento Reage Artista (React Artist Movement), of which I am a member, came into existence. In São Paulo, the Movimento Passe Livre (Free Public Transport Movement) initiated public protests against a twenty-cent increase in mass-transit fares. These protests spread around the country, culminating in what some analysts called the 'Jornadas de Junho' (June Journeys) and continued during the Confederations Cup soccer tournament. One of the movement's banners, 'it's not just about the twenty cents', showed the activists' political conscience.

The transport crisis spotlighted by the Movimento Passe Livre in 2013 exposed the gap between institutionality (biopower) and citizenship (biopolitics) and confirmed what was generally accepted: that public transport in Brazil privileges exclusion and inequality. Brazilian macro-politics is based on electoral agreements resulting from corporate relations between the state and the business community. These agreements cut across every socio-economic relationship managed by the state: in its threats to privatize university and hospital management, from agrarian issues to indigenous and *quilombola* affairs, and in the stewardship of arts and culture.⁴ The micro-political agendas of Brazilians engaged in denunciations of these corporate relationships between the state and private sector were at the heart of protests in the context of the 2014 World Cup, in the occupation of São Paulo and Rio de Janeiro schools in 2015, and the Primavera das Mulheres (Women's Spring) movement, in which women went to the streets to demand the resignation of congressman Eduardo Cunha – as House speaker, one of the main orchestrators of Dilma's removal from power, until he fell foul of a corruption scandal.⁵

It seems appropriate to stress the pedagogical value of these contemporary Brazilian insurgencies. Public protests reignited interest in political praxis, analogous in my opinion to Hannah Arendt's remark that political meaning operates in the 'interspace' between people and 'establishes itself as a relationship'. Arendt points out the damaging aspect of the prejudicial assumption that politics is an activity that exists only within an institutional framework and is performed by professional politicians. She alerts us to the fact that such a view provides an opening for fundamentalisms and defends the point of view that politics is everything that speaks to human relationships between those who are different or the same in society: 'Politics organizes in advance those who are absolutely different with a view to their *relative* equality and in contradistinction to their *relative* differences'.⁶ I emphasize that contemporary forms of organization and activism have motivated the construction of powerful cases of production of the *common*, according to Hardt and Negri, which I find similar to procedures found in creative artistic processes.⁷ Conversely, it can be said that artistic processes make

learning possible and create strong connections among those who participate in the activities.

By breaking with traditional modes of militancy, political activists and demonstrators across the globe have found other forms of protest and organization. They underscore the crisis in political representation by rejecting the need for leaders and by organizing themselves in a non-partisan manner. Free social-media collectives provide information counterpoints to corporate media. Pedagogies of conflict have expanded beyond the streets to emerge in the constant debates on social media, in classrooms, and at family celebrations, shows, performances, films and bars. Demonstrators speak of dreams and defend individual liberties. There is a strengthening of multiple strands of feminism and understandings of gender, anti-racist movements and public discussions about the extremely serious environmental crisis. Brazilian demonstrators stand against religious intolerance and in favour of the legalization of illegal drugs.

These acts of protest and activism have been employing resources and tactics of art, bringing back conversations about the intersection between politics and aesthetics, with the understanding that form is also content. Urban platforms for protest reflect the power and agency of creative acts of resistance, highlighting the capacity of the arts to mobilize and influence sociocultural policies and decision-making processes in times of crisis. These urban platforms generate both *effective* and *affective* action, reinforcing the role of the urban landscape as a stage, as an important locus of democracy with popular roots. Each protest sign in the streets looks like a post on social media, illustrating micro-politics at work and highlighting the role of the individual in a complex community.

But these activists are not alone. Brazil's renewed relationship with politics has also 'awakened' conservative demonstrators. In 2015, they took to the streets en masse wearing green and yellow, recalling nationalist aesthetics. These conservative demonstrators echo the voices of those who supported the 1964 *coup d'état* and the ensuing dictatorship, which lasted until 1985. Their right-wing agendas advocate protection of the traditional family and private property, the defence of exclusive religious perspectives, and military intervention. In opposition, Brazilian leftist groups are many and at times dissensual. Through the complexity and concreteness of Brazilian bodies in the streets with their physical presence and their techniques, scenes of protest project the diversity, chaos and contradictions of the different right- and left-wing agendas.

In Brazil, this political body in the streets employs what it has learned from *carnaval*. The polyphony of demands stemming from micro-politics and the lack of leadership can no longer be expressed in the form of political rallies. The practices of *carnaval* and their anarchist aspects became powerful features in recent demonstrations in Brazil, in the organization of protest marches, in the marches themselves and in the display of irreverent posters. Anarchical *carnaval* practices became powerful agents in protests; the same is true for the public enactment of micro-political agendas, a performance in which demonstrators cast themselves as their own protagonists on the collective stage that is the streets. For example, aesthetic elaboration is integral to black bloc tactics and to the way marches begin and end. The power of *carnaval* is the power of the body, which has always been underestimated as alienation and underutilized by revellers. Although historically distrusted by political activists, in

recent years the practices of *carnaval* have become popular tools of political action in Brazil.

The Movimento Reage Artista took to the streets of Rio de Janeiro in 2013 to demand a dialogue with the authorities on the development of more pluralistic and democratic policies in arts and culture. The movement became active in debates concerning the legacy of the mega-events held in the city, like the World Cup and the 2016 Olympics, and in developing a law supporting the ongoing work of artists. The impeachment of President Dilma Rousseff brought Vice President Michel Temer to power. Once he took control of the government, Temer attempted to merge the Ministry of Culture (MINC) and the Ministry of Education (MEC). The Ocupa MINC-RJ (Occupy Ministry of Culture-RJ) movement resisted Temer's measure and, with the broad participation of artists, those supporting or making culture, producers, students and faculty, was able to undo the merger. The occupation of the Palácio Capanema, the regional seat of the MINC in Rio de Janeiro, resisted for some seventy-three days. The movement remained organized even after the preservation of the Ministry of Culture had been guaranteed. It committed to the agenda of denouncing the impeachment as a coup and demanding Temer's resignation as interim president. After their expulsion from the Capanema building, artist-demonstrators occupied a former concert hall and nightclub belonging to the Federal University of Rio de Janeiro and remained there for several more weeks.⁸ Daily activities during the occupation of the Rio de Janeiro MINC brought together aesthetics and politics by mixing discussions with theatrical events, classes with performances, and assemblies with shows and parties.

The streets taught a historical perspective on the debate about representation. A historical perspective on protest and resistance in Brazil can help us focus our analyses of the crisis of representation at this political juncture. The understanding that there is no inherent clash between form and content in art and culture resonates with a political analysis of the aesthetic practices we witnessed in the 2013 demonstrations: there is no separation between art and politics. As Rancière explains in *The Politics of Aesthetics*, the fundamental field of operations for artists and arts management, as well as for political agents, is that of the imaginary and the ability to reflect and influence the 'distribution of the sensible'.⁹ The dispute of the imaginary in the arts acts out internally in the search for a non-pedagogical perspective, whether from the capacity for affect, by means of creativity, or through experience. According to Walter Benjamin, the arts expand channels of communication while acknowledging that their methods and techniques are political.¹⁰ Dissensus demands the invention of other conceptual frames and analytical expansion. If art and culture cut across all spheres of social life, then artists need to change the paradigms of discussion and practice in the cultural field by expanding them to include ideas about the city, the state, the country – and thus reclaim their intrinsic potential.

NOTES

- 1 Félix Guattari and Suely Rolnik, *Molecular Revolution in Brazil*, trans. Karel Clapshow and Brian Holmes (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2007).

- 2 The ‘Massacre of Pinheirinho’ consisted of the eviction of the community of Pinheirinho on 22 January 2012. The police violently executed an order for repossession of the land issued by the state court, provoking a revolt and protests in Brazil and in a number of cities around the world.
- 3 The building, constructed in the nineteenth century in Rio de Janeiro, was the seat of the Indian Protection Service beginning in 1910, becoming the Museu do Índio (Indian Museum) from 1953 to 1977, based on a project conceived by Darcy Ribeiro, that was intended to be the creation of an indigenous university. With its occupation in 2006, the location was transformed into an urban indigenous village that served as a home for people from diverse ethnic groups.
- 4 [TN] *Quilombola* are inhabitants of communities founded by escaped slaves in the Brazilian interior from the seventeenth century.
- 5 [TN] Accused of corruption in Operação Lava Jato (Operation Car Wash), Cunha was suspended in May 2016 and arrested in October of the same year.
- 6 Hannah Arendt, *The Promise of Politics* (New York: Schocken Books, 2005), p. 96.
- 7 Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, *Multitude: War and Democracy in the Age of Empire* (New York: Penguin Press, 2004), p. 202.
- 8 [TN] The site, in Botafogo, RJ, was called Canecão, and had been closed since 2010.
- 9 Jacques Rancière, *The Politics of Aesthetics: The Distribution of the Sensible*, trans. Gabriel Rockhill (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2000), p. 3.
- 10 Walter Benjamin, ‘The Author as Producer’, trans. John Heckman, *New Left Review*, 1, 62 (July–August 1970), pp. 83–96.

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