

RIGOR/RESONANCE + ART AS CONFRONTATION

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A five-year interval separates these two essays on the work of **Ricardo Basbaum**:

Rigor/Resonance, written in 1992 and revised in 1997, attempts to analyze the internal strategies of the **NBP (New Bases for Personality)** project by relating them to the specific concepts of Repersonalization and Variety, which are regarded as constituent elements of a certain Brazilianness to be read not as a form/content relationship but as the function of a singularity of perception and behavior disseminated throughout culture;

Art as Confrontation: A Field Diary, written in 1997, is a brief evaluation of the workings of the external interface of the NBP project, mapping the flexibility of intuitions regarding the administration of conflict visible in the work-context relationship.

RIGOR/RESONANCE

Significations, according to Roland Barthes (1), which are connected to the arts just as the order of signs is connected to language, occur when a semantic nucleus is involved by “a field of infinite expansion in which meaning overflows, radiates, without losing its impression (its capacity for imprinting itself)”. Through his work in the visual arts, **Ricardo Basbaum** pursues an interest in the mechanisms of exchange between this nucleus of semantic rigor, inhabited by concepts, and the periphery, the “zone of turbulence” and locus of resonances which, through a process of accumulation, pressure the artistic fact not into diluting itself but, rather, into unfolding its meaning in time.

In other words, he is attracted to the procedure-place, a space temporized by actions, between the concept which generates images and the images which generate systems of decodification. The option to work in this space between, a space problematized by contaminations, induces the unfixed use of materials and objects, as demonstrated in his current phase, developed under the conduit of the **NBP - New Bases for Personality**.

NBP is a sort of safe-conduct for the use of any means of expression. The use of the acronym, superimposed upon the most diverse surfaces or making up the work itself, as a form inserted into objects, is a practice of appropriation of the variety of the world. A voraciousness, however, discreet and immune to cynicism or indifference.

Carefully adhering to, but not fixated on his objects, **Basbaum** proposes solidarity in the face of the various, annulling in variety its nature of diversity, which would be variety counterposed to itself. The objects of the NBP phase are like autonomous stations, cast in a non-hierarchic relationship of totalities, on the watch for the fluidity of the observer's trajectory. They point to a posture which speaks, it would appear to us, of a certain Brazilianness, surfacing as a cultural injunction, a force independent of the artist's conscious intentions.

New Bases for Personality is an equation that apprehends a fundamental element of what we shall call here "a certain Brazilianness" - the experience of repersonalization. Despite the patent similarity between the names, the fact occurred as a non-conscious process to **Basbaum**, thus acting by default as a creator pierced by determinants of the general community in which he is inserted.

In Brazil, repersonalization, as a condition of the imaginary, is a cultural fact stemming from the African diaspora in the country, one of the black man's answers to the white man, in the situation of near-extinction created by slavery. Repersonalization is a stratagem for conviviality. Initially developed as a "slave survival strategy" it is disseminated after the end of slavery as a "subsistence strategy of the oppressed" (2) exercised, in the search for social insertion, by the new group of the excluded generated in the process of liberation.

Repersonalization is based on the cultural attitude of establishing zones of contagion, where code mixing occurs, around secret nuclei, where the difference between one culture and another is renourished. Afro-Brazilian culture reaffirmed itself and strengthened its identity by preserving secret nuclei of initiation into religious cults. In the zones of contagion - such as the *roda de samba*(*) - it expanded, communicated, and assimilated new conditions, and, through a sort of combative seduction, legitimized itself to the other. Good work in the domain of significations. The careful use of cultural exchange mechanisms enabled the recreation of the group's characteristic forms of expression (such as music, food, and gesture) to find resonance in the general community and, by adhesion, to constitute itself as a significant portion of facts which typify nationality.

The standard of behavior for repersonalization first established itself in the singularity of the logical schemes of the Afro-Brazilian community. It was initially articulated in the situation of forced solidarity between the dignitaries of hostile ethnicities, each with its sacred knowledge, accumulated in the holds of the slave ships.

According to Bastide (3), Afro-Brazilian thought is guided by two principles: the principle of participation, through which all existing things are ordered by affiliation to arbitrated forces: the *orixás*; and the principle of scission which, regulating the former one, prevents the passage of items from one roster of relationship (or connection) to another. The two principles guide perception in the recognition of "similarities by efficiency", as when entities, even while belonging to different explanations of the world, are ruled by analogous arbitrated forces.

The ability to detect parity between the distinct gods of the different African ethnicities was the symbolic tool which allowed for the accommodation of hostilities between enemy tribes, in the labor of solidarity necessary to the confrontation with a same adverse destiny - slavery. As a matrix of thought, the recognition of "similarities by efficiency" was the base for the Afro-Brazilian community's reading of the sacred figures of Christianity, in its effort to find a common territory of symbolic exchange, for the negotiation of survival.

Contradicting the accepted idea of the existence of syncretism in Brazilian culture, Bastide states that, because of the principle of scission, recognition of a relationship governed by the principle of participation between, for instance, Iemanjá and Our Lady, does not lead to conversion, to elimination, or assimilation of one item by another. Simply put, each remains operant in the specificity of its explanatory schema of the world, and is the subject of perception of this analogy who should encounter a certain singular fluidity so as to be able to circulate between the logical blocks of each arrangement, offsetting the real through one logic or another, according to circumstances.

We may say that the fluidity of trajectory is the essence of the process of repersonalization. The subject of the fluidity does not encourage deceptions in experiencing that distinct foundational narratives are capable of operating the real as parallel efficiencies. Consequently, they have an ease in assuming, tranquilly, the variety inherent to the world, taming it through the subtlety of contextualizations.

It is principally around this specific sort of awareness of variety, as multiplicity without counterposition, simultaneous and apposed multiplicities, sometimes complementary, that the contact between the model of cultural behavior and the formalization of **Ricardo Basbaum's** current phase takes place. But before proceeding, however, let us clearly establish that the appropriateness of **NBP** to a fundamental element in the country's general culture, repersonalization, occurs without a direct involvement in questions of nationality, without manifestos or subserviences to typical iconographies (see PS).

The **NBP** project is the result of a long effort of understanding, connected to fundamental questions of the artistic process, and attuned to the international scene. The search for the image – in the early years of painting, at the beginning of the Eighties; the questioning of support – in the cutout paintings; the passage to three-dimensionality – in the installed paintings; the use of media – in the performances, in the use of the eye mark and the street posters; the collective work with the Dupla Especializada and the Grupo Seis Mãos and the theoretical work, in published texts and lectures on the visual arts.

For a long time, **Basbaum** bewildered the audience with his sudden changes of direction, with work that moved from hermetic to frankly uncomfortable, like the long series of micro-installations which, concomitantly with other works, lasted throughout the second half of the Eighties. Looking back, it is

doubtless in the experience of these phases, sometimes occurring in succession, sometimes simultaneously, with works erected on the borderline between painting, object, installation and performance, that we may locate the genesis of what has been singled out as the determining factor for **NBP**: an attitude towards the concept of variety.

Variety is one of the modes of excess. Excess can be dealt with from either an exclusive or an inclusive vector. In the visual arts, the exclusive vector demarcates limits around zones of language, bestowing a certain intelligibility upon the art scene, ordering it through a choice of vocabulary. The inclusive vector acts against the comfort of this intelligibility, affirming an extreme pluralism and a complexity of coexistence for the diverse means of expression, in an ultra-contemporary manoeuvre of capturing the “erratic, discontinuous traces” which structure the image as signification.

Speaking of signification, Barthes indicates two levels of apprehension of meaning: the obvious meaning, “of closed evidence, caught in a complete system of destination,” constituted by “what represents itself naturally to the spirit”, and the obtuse, veiled meaning, whose extension is “outside culture, knowledge, and information”. The latter, being “indifferent to moral or aesthetic categories (the trivial, the futile, the fake and the pastiche)”, is included in the category of carnival, configuring itself in a welcoming fold of resonances, of the imprecise, of the excess, capable of confounding not only the content but the totality of signifying relationships as reference.

The reference, according to Marshall Sahlins (4), is a doubly arbitrary relationship of “relative segmentation and selective representation”. It puts the system of meaning in a situation of “empirical risk” in dealing with the variety contained in other systems of intensity, like the “intelligent subject” involved in the motivated use of signs for personal projects, or the “intransigent world”, capable of contradicting through the multiplicity of things the signifying system erected to describe it.

In face of the pragmatism and the contingency of many systems, reference presents a tendency to restrict and “fix the floating chain of signifiers, so as to combat the terror of uncertain signs.” This daily struggle generates a favorable situation as regards the attitude of control over the text which, invested with the “responsibility for the use of the message”, questions the image, basically a polysemous sign, involving everything with the question “what is this?”

In at least three instances in the history of the visual arts in this century, this situation of control in the text/image relationship was used as material for work: Magritte’s pipe/non-pipe; Rauschenberg’s telegram/picture; Craig Martin’s drinking glass/oak. All three works present a situation of commented counter-illustration. An object was confirmed as a sovereign image by the negation of its obvious meaning and plunge into the “ebullience of conjectures” of the obtuse meaning. By an arbitrary counterdemonstration (“this is not a pipe”), in being radically taken to its extreme point of intelligibility by consensus, the situation of the control of resonances in the text/image relationship was destabilized.

NBP will treat the same question somewhat differently. Aware of the irreducibility of one system to another, **Basbaum** abandons all intention of commentary upon the text/image relationship and chooses to overlay the units of discourse, establishing them from a unified creative moment. In the best examples of **NBP**, the image never illustrates the text (the acronym) nor does the text caption the image. Precedence or reference do not exist. The situation of control is imploded because, beyond simultaneity, no obvious relationship is proposed.

It is in the terrain of the obtuse, of resonances, that a non-hierarchic connection is established: new bases of personality/multiplicity of means. Standing outside the territory of representation and, therefore, outside the reach of the laws stored away in culture to rule the symbolic condition, the pure presentation of two roles of varieties demonstrates the iconic system of the image as a competency parallel to the index system of the language. Both will, by counterposition, constitute the work in a structure of continuous re-feeding, a game of contaminations without ancestries.

With **NBP**, **Basbaum** has created a long-term project similar to that of Opalka's numbers, with the capital difference that it is fully permeable by variety, in a singularly Brazilian way, and to experimentation, in a very contemporary way. A project exposed to all contagion, which does not run the risk, over time, of losing its center: as the center is, precisely, made up of the articulation between two possibilities of fluidity in change: the non-explicit meaning in the NBP acronym-text, and the multiplicity of the means of expression utilizable by the circumstantial image.

PS. Repersonalization: Antropofagias, Tropicálias, Hybridisms, Laterality...

In a text on Cildo Meireles and Tunga, Paulo Venâncio (5) writes that laterality, as an oblique, non-polarized gaze, is the structural position of perception capable of articulating "the tradition of the history of modern art and a certain social context". At first denying this "structural position" a value of identity and, later, two sentences ahead, suggesting that our identity "is this effort of introjection, of obsessive lived experience, and reflection of cultural matrixes." Despite the slight oscillation, Paulo Venâncio lucidly poses the central question which, for at least seventy years, surfaces in (the thinking about) the Brazilian visual arts, whenever a definition of national identity is attempted.

The advantage of the term laterality over *Antropofagia*, *Tropicalismo* or *Hybridism*, which more or less share a conceptual intuition, lies in the fact that laterality is the term most exempt from formal suggestions. Carrying with it an indication of movement, the term bears the mark of "fluidity of transfer between logical blocks" of which we spoke when presenting the experience of repersonalization as a basis of the national image-repertory. Emphasizing the action of the subject which circulates and not the objects among which he circulates, laterality points to the non-adherence to experienced iconographies, underlining the basic stance in the condition of perceptive fluidity.

The conceptual clarity of a term such as laterality, becoming possible in the present, may be

symptomatic of the universalization of certain procedures in information societies, which possess a wide range of access to images and discourses. What was constitutional in transcultural communities such as our own – the need to articulate between the diversity of founding meta-narratives, faced by the native, the negro and the European in Brazilian lands – has now become the quotidian circumstance for increasingly larger segments of the international community that deal with a continuous flux of information. Sharpened contemporary sensibilities discover the pragmatic value of non-polarized lateralities.

A new perception and action game for the world (to us Brazilians, an old friend), laterality is perhaps another name for the experience of repersonalization. Thanks to the previously mentioned “effort of introjection, obsessive lived experience, and reflection of cultural matrixes”, Brazilian culture has long since generated a wide-ranging pattern of communication, capable of including the most disparate discourses. Purged of some eventual bad habits of functioning – indifference, irresponsibility, negligence – the pattern possesses the worthy sophistication of a game of logic, fully open to circumstance. Propitious to human frailty in situations of risk, it is adequate to the present moment of the international scene, as much as it was adequate to the Afro-Brazilian scene, to the situation of near-extirpation brought about by slavery. This is the reason why an artist, working with contemporary questions of an international vocabulary may be so impregnated by this so-called “Brazilianness”.

ART AS CONFRONTATION: A FIELD DIARY

Since 1989, **Ricardo Basbaum** has been developing a non-dichotomic form of inserting the Text/Image duality into his work. This option is clearly signalled in the **NBP** project, as much through his choice of treating the text as an acronym - a set of letters perceived as a trade mark, a closed form; as by the choice of treating the image as an emblem, a form contaminated by a referential functioning, typical of institutional names.

From 1993 onward, the collapsing movement of the Text / Image dichotomy is completed by the inclusion of diagrams, as an outstanding unity of vocabulary in the **NBP** project. In the diagrams, the lines of the drawing provide the grammatical function of articulating, in a discourse of action, the narrative elements, such as stains, textures, and words which, endowed with a figural procedure, act as transitory anchors in the composition of the gaze on the final image.

The **NBP** diagrams are diagrams of confrontation. As such, more than surfaces for recording, they are surfaces of accumulation, serial superimpositions of trajectories, which reveal the oscillating forces involved in the ambiguity of the games of proximity. They demarcate situations in process, where future possibilities may be altered by the very act of demarcation. They are diagrams in the form of a circuit of risk, open diagrams. They indicate not the structures which interconnect the elements, but the situations of confrontation pressuring the structures.

In the **New Bases for Personality** exhibition (IBEU gallery, Rio de Janeiro, August 1993), the diagrams spoke to the confrontations arising from me-you situations of capture, situations of seduction and loss, transformed into icons by the objects which made up the installation: a cage-like capsule-bench for two, made of steel mesh and iron structure; a set of cushions in emblematic form, and a rug. A situation of comfort was offered – to sit, to lay down – at the price of mutual submission to the gaze of the other. By means of a maneuver of continuous reversal of the places-procedures, suited to the subject who observes and to the observed object, visibility as risk and currency for exchange was established in the games of proximity.

In 1997, in the **NBP: Identity/Architecture** exhibition (Espaço Aberto UFF, Niterói), the confrontation no longer occurs between individuals (me-you), but between the territory of individual power and territories of institutional power. Perhaps due to the inequality of the conflicting territories, the process set in motion was one of resistance in invisibility.

In the University entrance hall, Basbaum duplicated the objects: desk, board and mail slots. He did this so mimetically that, on a first visit, I failed to notice the work in its totality, only the mail slot with the diagrams. I returned on a Sunday and observed the installation through the glass, from the outside of the door to the closed hall. At a distance, the text on the bulletin board created by the artist, the content of which differs from the institutional, could not be read, only the typesetting could be perceived, thinner and more elegant than that which was emulated.

Mimetism is a combat strategy which makes use of contextual invisibilities, where the body becomes a function of threats by the environment, responding with impulses of copy, silence and immobility. But this impulse of effacement, in nature, is nourished from within by a will to survive and an affirmation of the continuity of life at its limits. A secret joy, participating in invisibility like the future noise of some secret explosion.

This may be the line of flight pointed out by the elegance of the typesetting on the duplicated bulletin board: a natural elegance being presented as the joy of knowing one's self to be subtly visible, even in borderline situations of effacement. It is surprising to find, in such a minimal index of the visual field, a nucleus of resistance. That it should be located in a typographical detail is revealing. The montage is disquieting, even sombre, in its sobriety. In introjecting the mechanisms of invisibility as a combat strategy with super potent sectors of the real, in this case the University, the visual artist is transmuted into the Invisible Man, exclusively linguistic, always ready to be purged of the conditioning keys of reading, without direct access to an active body capable of rebellion.

The question arises: what is the relationship between devices of bodily presence and the work as a support of amplified meaning? We understand that the removal of the artist's body, taking place as much by the negation (denial) of the specific marks of manufacture (use of industrialized objects) as by, in this case, the refusal toward intransitive creation (adoption of duplicated objects), seeks to

create a vacuum to be filled by the body of the other, summoned, by integration or resistance, into being the agent of the necessary extension of the limits for the articulation of language.

The procedure indicated is investigated in the series, begun by **Basbaum** in 1994 and still in progress, “**Would you like to participate in an artistic experience?**”. Through this invitation, an industrial object, with a specific form capable of being duplicated and disrespected in its canonic relationship to the surrounding space – it can be placed any way in any position – is offered to the use or disuse of whosoever may be willing to participate in the experience. In the project’s current stage the possibilities of interaction would appear to be upheld by two main characteristics:

Reversibility - function of use and disuse offered to participants. If the manipulation respects the object’s limits of integrity, it can always return to its condition as object in a gallery, to be exhibited along with a record of its encounters in the world;

Banalization - emphatically demonstrated in the response-piece which appropriated, not the object but its emblematic form (6), exposing it to the risks of a whole series of delirious versions, with loss of proportions and alterations of material. It is a maneuver of inclusion, where the simulacrum does not set in, as a series which cancels out origin, for all the action is an interaction of humor. A parody of the art object as a reference for contamination, taking on the world as an accepted mystery which paradoxically confers upon the subject, confronted with the variety of existence, a key to understanding revealed as personal and non-transferable experience.

In the field demarcated by these two variables, risk and defense are like poison and antidote coming from a same material, for reversibility is one of the characteristics of a certain mimetism, and mimetism is the initial impulse of the procedures of banalization.

Let us return to the initial me/you confrontation which began the roundelay of risks: repersonalization/resistance; visibility/invisibility; mimetism/banalization. The subsequent confrontations – individual/institution, object/user – are merely amplified transpositions of the same conflict. It would appear to me that the great discovery for freeing the battleground from being painted in sombre (or sober) colors is the arrival upon the scene of the concept of reversibility.

Understanding reversibility as a given of the real reinstates a powerful joy in the face of the risks of the games of proximity, the experimental games of constitution of being, which begin to be experienced as sets of contextual rules, laws without adherence, simultaneous and negotiable. Reversibility, as a virtue of the passage, is an experience of knowledge conditioned to the fluidity of interaction, a model for activating the narratives of transmutation of possibilities.

About the relations between reversibility with society in general, we may say that reversibility is a given of direct/diffuse access in societies which possess religions that deal with the phenomenon of possession, which is paradigmatic of reversibility in conditions of being. Even when not recognized as

the country's official religion, as is the case of Taoism in China or **candomblé** in Brazil, the strong presence of this phenomenon in culture allows them to model figures of knowledge on the nation's anthropological unconscious. Through this channel, it would appear to us, reversibility acts as the cultural fact which makes viable, even under strong restrictions, the absorption by the community of difficult political facts such as "one country, two systems" (China) or the constant exchange of monetary currency (Brazil) (7). It is, as may be seen, a powerful mechanism and its use demands serious responsibility.

By including reversibility in his repertory, Basbaum subtly, almost secretly equates conflict and joy (the acid test). The removal of the artist's body-presence, taking place for the benefit of an instant of body-reflection, body-receptacle-of-the-other, attracts in its vacuum future potentials for an interaction in the present, reversing the rules between production and reception of the artistic fact and opening the game of creation to the indeterminate. "Good luck"?

NOTES

1. BARTHES, Roland. O Óbvio e o Obtuso: Ensaios Críticos III. Rio de Janeiro, Nova Fronteira, 1990. 284 pp.
2. MOURA, Roberto. Tia Ciata e a Pequena África no Rio de Janeiro. Rio de Janeiro, Funarte, 1983. 110 pp.
MUNIZ SODRÉ. O Terreiro e a Cidade: A forma social negro-brasileira. Petrópolis, Vozes, 1988. 165pp.
3. BASTIDE, Roger. Sociologia. Org. Maria Isaura Pereira Quieroz. São Paulo, Atica, 1983. 208 pp.
4. SAHLINS, Marshall. Ilhas de História. Rio de Janeiro, Zahar, 1990. 218pp.
5. VENÂNCIO FILHO, Paulo. "Situações Limites", in Tunga "Lezarts", Cildo Meireles "Through". Bélgica, Kunststichting - Kanaal Art Foundation, 1989, pp. 26-27.
6. The experience has been recorded on video. "Um Registro de Constatação de Arte no projeto NBP de Ricardo Basbaum" [A Record of Verification of Art in Ricardo Basbaum's NBP Project] by Pedro de Vasconcellos and Wagner Wasconcelos (SIM ou ZERO), Enseada das Garças, ES, 1994.
7. Over the last thirty years the country has undergone seven monetary reforms. The name of the currency zigzagged from Cruzeiro, which it had been since before 1964, at the start of the dictatorship, to Cruzeiro Novo (1967), again the Cruzeiro (1970), Cruzado (1986), Cruzado Novo (1989), Cruzado yet again (1990), Cruzeiro Real (1993) and, finally, Real (1994), the name of an ancient monetary unit in both Portugal and Brazil. The illustration of the bills during this period of thirty years followed a peculiar evolutionary line. The verso always bore images complementary to the chosen theme, starting with historical figures of tradition and incorporating exponents of culture such as musicians, poets, painters, writers, scientists, and then on to regional types such as the **gaúcho** and the **baiana**, with which the series has ceased. The Real arrives and a change takes place. On one side the different denominations are imprinted with the image of the Republic and on the other they bear examples of the national fauna. The series begins, on the one Real note, with the image of the **colibri** (hummingbird) feeding its young, which had already been used on the one hundred thousand Cruzeiro bill as a complement to the figure of scientist Augusto Ruschi. In the same fashion, the image of the Republic had already been used on the two hundred Cruzados Novos bill (1989) and, soon after that, on the two hundred Cruzeiros note. There is an undeniable interest in this double movement which, in name, gives up the stars (the Cruzeiro) and returns to the Real, and, in image, slowly gives up the cult of personality and seeks animal nature, on one hand, and the fixation of an abstract, referential idea, on the other, which is a compromise in the administration of the collective (the Republic).

GLOSSARY

roda de samba - any gathering where samba music is played, sung and/or danced.

orixá - an African deity (especially gege-nagô) in Afro-Brazilian religions.

antropofagia - literally translated, anthropophagy or cannibalism. From the title of one of the most important of Brazilian modernist manifestos, written in 1928 by poet, novelist and playwright Oswald de Andrade. The "Manifesto Antropófago" was one of the touchstones for the modernist movement's program for cultural "devouement", and in its search for national identity was utterly innovative in expression. Its reverberations and propositions may be observed in Brazilian culture through at least the early 1970s.

tropicalismo - deriving from 'Tropicália', a complex 1967 Penetrable installation by Brazilian artist Hélio Oiticica which inspired a generation as catchword in music, poetry, theater and the visual arts.
candomblé - the religion of the ioruba negroes in Bahia, or any of the great feasts of the orixás. By extension, the sanctuary where such feasts are celebrated.

gaúcho - a male native of the state of Rio Grande do Sul, south of Brazil.

baiana - a female native of the state of Bahia, Northeast of Brazil.