

frieze

Time & Place

While the gritty glamour of Marepe's work valorizes the ingenuity of the inhabitants of north-eastern Brazil, its meaning is further complicated when it travels

When writers describe the work of the Brazilian artist Marcos Reis Peixoto, who calls himself Marepe, they note the local, provincial aspect of his materials and references. In museum and gallery press releases, listings and critical reviews Marepe's 'deep relationship to local tradition' and 'complex layering of references and meanings' are the descriptive mantras that are cited and repeated, often without elaboration. Indeed, in the American and European contexts in which his work has attracted increasing attention over the past four years Marepe's opacity forms a part of his identity.

The broader issue here, of how localized cultural practice operates within a globalized audience, is of course by now a familiar one. When we talk about globalization, we are usually concerned with what Paulo Herkenhoff and others have termed 'universal voyeurism', an assimilative Euro-American spectatorial position that we worry drains local art of its meaning as a condition of broadening its audience. In 2003 Marepe was included in the Walker Art Center's significant travelling exhibition on this topic, 'How Latitudes Become Forms: Art in a Global Age', whose curators described the works in the exhibition as 'determinedly individualized, yet provocatively informed by [their] cultural context. [The artists'] practices transcend national boundaries without surrendering their specificity.' What this has often meant, for better or worse, is that locally specific art is shown outside the circumscribed borders of its creation without sufficient explanation or contextualization, sometimes justified by the idea of resisting integration. Marepe's practice highlights the continuing challenges posed to and by artists whose locally referential work is exhibited in new contexts abroad, which may obscure or change their meaning. But because Marepe works with a particular emphasis on relocation and shifting context, his challenge is somewhat different, and opens up the well-worn binary discussion of peripheral production versus central consumption.

Interestingly enough, Marepe's work finds its generative point in his interaction with European culture. He lives in Santo Antônio de Jesus, in Bahia, the north-eastern region of Brazil that was the hub of the slave trade and sugar economies until the late 19th century. He was exposed to Europe about 15 years ago, in his early twenties, when he

won a prize at university that allowed him to travel; he spent time in Germany and Italy and unsurprisingly cites Marcel Duchamp as a formative influence. The artist notes that Europe provided a stimulus, in all its marked differences from Bahian culture, that provoked him to recognize 'the beauty and sadness, the joy and the ugl[iness]' of his own country.¹ He became aware of the creativity conditioned by the poverty of Bahia, the self-sufficient artistry and innovation required in making do, in getting by – an interest that, in other hands, could be misconstrued as romanticizing destitution. We often find in Marepe's work a tension between romance and poverty, carried out by his juxtapositions of decorative elements and natural materials, as in *O Presente dos Presentes* (The Gift of Gifts, 2002), which consists of small clay cubes wrapped up like Christmas presents with silk ribbons and metallic stars. Much as Beatriz Milhazes' paintings can be said to reflect the dirty prettiness of Rio de Janeiro, so Marepe's sculptures and installations validate the workaday ingenuity of the north-east to suggest that this gritty glamour may in fact be part of a broader expression of modern Brazilian experience.

practice of putting a coloured acetate sheet in front of black and white television screens, a home-made Bahian aesthetic improvement born equally of lack and desire. In a characteristic recombination of such references with his own personal history Marepe placed coloured plastic over nine identical photographs of himself taken as a young boy, when he was dressed up as a parrot for a parade on Brazil's independence day; the images move up and down to simulate a bird-like flight. In this complex work technology and popular culture occlude personal and cultural history at the same time as they provoke a creative customization and repersonalization of those histories.

For Marepe, as with his neo-Concretist predecessors Lygia Clark, Lygia Pape and Hélio Oiticica, the meaning of the art object regularly depends on its insertion into a social space and its active use by a participating spectator. His *Embutido Recôncavo* (2003) is a do-it-yourself type of interactive architecture, a full-scale housing unit based on the improvised domestic architecture found in Bahia, meant to be moved around and reconfigured by viewers. When the piece was shown in Venice in 2003, a guard told people of the piece's function and encouraged them to experiment with it. But *Cabeça Acústica* (Acoustic Head, 1995), an early and often cited work of Marepe's, has sometimes been exhibited only as an object; to Marepe's dismay viewers have not been allowed to interact with it. The piece combines two metal laundry tubs and a funnel to make an amplification chamber; its transfiguration of the commonplace tubs is only fully realized when one person puts their head inside the contraption and another vocalizes into the funnel. His *Arca Azul de Noé* (Blue Noah's Ark, 2004), shown last year at PS1 in New York and again this summer at Anton Kern Gallery, has suffered much the same fate after originally arriving

broken in New York. The piece centres on a raised box made of local wood that Marepe has covered with blue (and small bits of purple) metallic contact paper. It is covered with wire mesh, and contains cheap disposable plastic cups that are meant to be churned and crunched by a wooden crank. The piece is a homage to the artist's maternal grandfather, made on his 84th birthday. To Marepe the cups and crank represent consumption and the churning of time; he believes that 'the materials do not change [their] meaning when dislocated from a place to another one', but he recognizes that the continuity of such meanings may depend, in cases such as this, on viewers being able to turn the crank.²

But Marepe seems not to be terribly worried about these imperfect presentations of his work, a position consistent with his lack of anxiety about the way he is shown and understood in Euro-American contexts. I was surprised to learn, for example, that he does not have the articles written about him in other languages translated into Portuguese (though he tells me he is very curious to learn what they say). As he said before his solo show at Anton Kern last year: 'I don't know America, so I see it as a sort of mutual exploration.'³ The opacity, it seems, is reciprocal.

Although he denies it when asked, this benign ignorance almost seems deliberate, an insistence on continuing mystery. In considering his audience, Marepe says, 'I think about an audience who will see the work, but I do not think about a specific place or a determined region or nationality.'⁴ He happily notes that 'part of the magic of working in the arts [is that] there are certain things that are common to all of us in some way'.⁵ Perhaps not surprisingly, he brushes off talk of globalization; he regards Brazil as a country whose globalization occurred a long time ago through its colonial history. Marepe would also dispute the primary anxiety that underlies the guilt aspect of our Euro-American interest in the topic: that art, like produce, loses its flavour when shipped half-way around the world; that its local identity is a perishable commodity, whose most intense effects are found closest to its source.

Without diminishing the complexity of this dialectic between the local and global, one can point out that, with periodic exceptions, it hasn't left much room for the multi-centred attitude Lucy Lippard advocated eight years ago, when she wrote that 'there are vestiges in every place that are not altogether culturally determined, or that interact with cultural assumptions to form a kind of hybrid location'.⁶ Pierre Huyghe, referring to his Antarctic boat trip/art project as an effort to find a 'no-knowledge zone', seems to be in search of a similar free space (oblivious to his location within a second wave of art globalization, a sort of neo-colonialist progression from centre to margins in which wealthy Euro-American artist-tourists are striking out to far lands to locate projects for as yet indeterminate audiences).⁷ Similarly, Alfons Hug's sputtering San Paulo Biennial of last

year tried to elucidate an idea of what he called 'no-man's land', which he intended as something akin to what Lippard and Marepe are describing, and what Huyghe seems to have literalized as geography – a space of mutual confusion and seduction, without clear ownership, where art is unburdened and free to speak its own language.

Colour is like this: irreducible, non-discursive and subjective, it is stubbornly transferable, metaphysically unmoored. And yet it can be bounded and packaged. Thierry de Duve highlighted this in detailing Duchamp's passage from painting through colour to the ready-made.⁸ In de Duve's idea of 'pictorial nominalism' painting pictures became no longer possible for Duchamp, a defeatism that forced the artist to reinvent painting into the ready-made – a gesture of self-denial that transcended its own abnegation. We can find in Marepe, who naturally embraces Duchamp, a kind of cultural nominalism, an admission of the impossibility of translation – and consequently, his packaging and release of Bahian material and subjects into the seemingly self-denying open aesthetics of global dialogue, all without prejudice.

Are we comfortable with locality functioning this way in an artist's practice, as a ready-made unto itself? Given the concern with which Mexican curator Cuauhtémoc Medina notes the way that '[Gabriel] Orozco's work became a deterritorialized but nevertheless nationally branded type of production in the early 1990s', we can assume there will remain significant discomfort around this for some time, particularly at the local level.⁹ A work such as *Tudo no Mesmo Lugar pelo Menor Preço* (Everything at the Same Place for the Lowest Price, 2002) poses one of the central questions begged by Marepe's practice: what happens when an artist binds the locally defined meanings of his materials to the work, asking us to treat those meanings as part of his ready-made, a composite whole whose transfigured meaning depends both on his original referents and their recontextualization, and yet on neither? In *Tudo no Mesmo Lugar ...* for which Marepe transported a three-ton wall advertisement from a store in Santo Antônio de Jesus to the San Paulo Biennial 2002 gallery space, certain meanings travel, while others do not, and still others are born of the relocation. Marepe picked the Comercial São Luis sign because it honoured the memory of his father, who worked there. The piece serves as an allegory of capitalism and its role in migration and forcible displacement – significant themes in Bahian history – just as easily as it combines Warholian elements with Minimalism, including the transience of Sol LeWitt wall drawings. Like many of Marepe's works, *Tudo no Mesmo Lugar ...* sits in this liminal zone, suspended between a host of personal, local and more global Euro-American connotations that it seems to rely on, and yet, like an aesthetic refugee, clearly exists without.

In this light Marepe's works that emphasize use-value take on a particular importance. He admits that the fact that 'viewers do not have access to the original meaning[s]' of his

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materials poses a number of problems, but that 'even without this information, there is a sensorial communication that leads to the understanding of the work'.¹⁰ The strength of Marepe's practice rests on this suave refocusing of the neo-Concretist intimacy of touch and interaction to help his work slip through the opaque mirrors between the personal-local-global into Lippard's 'hybrid location'.

Funnily enough, it is criticism that remains among the locally defined aspects that still attend Marepe's work in this construction, its significance confined mainly to its own provincial readership. Perhaps an unnecessary arbiter trapped on the consumptive side of the mirror, this article may reasonably remain untranslated and unread by an audience located closer to home, including its very subject.

¹ Marepe in a taped statement, 7 February 2003. Translation from Portuguese provided by Galeria Luisa Strina, São Paulo, August 2005

² Interview with the author, August 2005. Interviews were conducted by email, with translation by Cristina Candeloro, Galeria Luisa Strina, São Paulo

³ '37 -Minute Conversation: Marepe in Conversation with Mariana Canepa Luna', Untitled, June 2004, p. 49

⁴ Op.cit., interview with the author

⁵ '37 -Minute Conversation', p. 49

⁶ Lucy R. Lippard, *The Lure of the Local: Senses of Place in a Multicentered Society*, The New Press, New York, 1997, p. 278

⁷ Tim Griffin et al., 'Remote Possibilities: A Roundtable Discussion on Land Art's Changing Terrain', *Artforum*, vol 43, no. 10, 2005, p. 290

⁸ Thierry de Duve, *Pictorial Nominalism: On Marcel Duchamp's Passage from Painting to the Readymade*, University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis, 1991

⁹ Vasif Kortun and Cuauhtémoc Medina, 'The Local Tango and the Global Dance', in Philippe Vergne, *How Latitudes Become Forms: Art in a Global Age*, Walker Art Center, Minnesota, 2003, p. 31

¹⁰ Op.cit., interview with the author

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