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## SITUATIONS/SIMULACRA: ARTUR BARRIO'S CHALLENGES TO THE BRAZILIAN ART SYSTEM IN THE LATE 1960s AND EARLY 1970s

**Abstract:** Artur Barrio's installations/"situations" from the late 1960s and early 1970s embody one of the most vigorous endeavours to expose the political repression and the crimes committed by the Brazilian military dictatorship. Barrio's artistic practice of that period also contributed to a reconfiguration of the Brazilian visual language, propounding a radical aesthetic that dismissed the established forms of expression to empower a stronger connection between art and this country's reality (whether social, political, or economic). This article briefly reviews Barrio's politically charged artistic projects from his early period, proposing the concept of *artistic simulacra* for a more precise definition of their relation with the oppressive political reality, on the one hand, and with the spectator, on the other hand.

**Keywords:** *bloody bundles (trouxas ensanguentadas)*; artistic simulacrum; ephemeral art; AI-5 Generation; Brazilian neo-avant-garde; Brazilian military dictatorship.

## **Historical Background**

On 1 April 1964, with large popular and political support<sup>2</sup>, a significant part of the Brazilian armed forces overthrew the reformist government led by president João Goulart, claiming a much-needed democratic resettlement of Brazilian society. The event went down in history as a "coup d'état," while its authors called it "revolution" in the legislative acts that institutionalized the political change.<sup>3</sup> By 1985, Brazil had been governed by five generals (Humberto de Alencar Castelo Branco, Artur da Costa e Silva, Emílio Garrastazu Médici, Ernesto Geisel, and João Figueiredo); it had undergone a process of institutionalization of authoritarianism (1964–1968), followed by a harsh repression period (1969–1974) and by a decline and a gradual openness to transition (1974–1985); the country experienced times of social crisis and increased censorship, but also of economic advancement (coinciding with the repression's pinnacle years).<sup>4</sup>

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Although Artur Barrio is considered one of the most important Brazilian artists of the 1960s and 1970s, with his early projects being part of the artistic sedition against the military dictatorship, as well

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<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>2</sup> Leslie Bethel. The Cambridge History of Latin America, Vol. IX: Brasil Since 1930, p. 168.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>3</sup> The term occurs as early as in the First Institutional Act, issued only a few days after the military overthrow of the authority.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>4</sup> Leslie Bethel. Op. cit., p. 170.

as against the artistic establishment,<sup>5</sup> and his practice also having contributed to the renewal of the Brazilian artistic scene over the following decades, the critics of his work often process a scant inventory of biographical data, which is usually the same. Among these is the fact that he was of Portuguese origin, born in Porto in 1945 to a family that would later emigrate to Brazil, settling in Rio de Janeiro. Attended the National Art School (Escola Nacional de Belas Artes), studying drawing and painting. He has participated in numerous national and international group exhibitions and has opened many solo exhibitions in Brazil and abroad. In his early career, he participated in some of the most important events in the context of artistic opposition against the military dictatorship, namely at the Salão da Bússola (Museum of Modern Art in Rio de Janeiro, 5 November – 5 December 1969) and in *Do Corpo à Terra* (part of the Avant-Garde Art Week event that took place in Belo Horizonte's Municipal Park, 17–21 April 1970). He was invited to participate in the famous exhibition "Information," curated by Kynaston McShine (20 September 1970)<sup>6</sup>, in *Documental1* (Kassel, 2002), in the 54th edition of the Venice Biennale (2011), in two editions of the Mercosul Biennale (1997 and 2003), and, starting from 1981, in multiple editions of the São Paulo Art Biennale.<sup>7</sup>

This paper deals with several episodes of Artur Barrio's early career – a period that coincides with the intensification of the repression exerted by the Brazilian military dictatorship, set between 13 December 1968, the enactment date of the regime's harshest regulatory act – the Fifth Institutional Act (AI-5), and 15 March 1974, when General Emílio Garrastazu Médici's term ended. These were the years when some of the young artists asserted themselves not only as promoters of the neo-avant-garde, but also of a radical opposition against the current political regime; thus, the political repression became one of the drives empowering them in their quest for new forms of expression. This group, called the AI-5 Generation, which did not share a cohesive programme, condemned the abuses, censorship and crimes of the Brazilian military dictatorship, aiming to pave the way for a wider contestation of the social order in general and of the system of arts in particular.

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From the very beginning, Artur Barrio professed virulent criticism of contemporary Brazilian society, "prone to maintaining the privilege of few by exploiting the many" and also of the artistic scene, as seen in a series of manifestos, which he wrote in the 1960s – 1970s. In one of them, dating from 1969, Barrio asserted his radical position, which we will also see explicitly stated in his artistic actions: "Manifest:/ against the art categories/ against the salons/ against the awards/ against the jury/ against the art critique." against the art critique."

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>5</sup> **Fernanda Negrete.** Chaos-Monde and the Aesthetics of Depth in Artur Barrio, Jacques Coursil, and Damián Ortega. Tamara Silva Chagas. "Artur Barrio: O potencial criativo da precariedade."

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>6</sup> Camila Maroja. Transforming Spectators into Witnesses: Artur Barrio's *Bloody Bundles*, pp. 24, 27.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>7</sup> **See Claudia Calirman.** *Brazilian Art under Dictatorship*, pp. 79–80; Fernanda Pequeno. "Artur Barrio: historicizando situações e experiências," p. 720; Tamara Silva Chagas. "Situação T/T1, de Artur Barrio, e a arte-guerrilha conforme Frederico Morais," p. 135, etc.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>8</sup> As far as Barrio is concerned, Fernanda Negrete dismisses such causality: "Anyway, for Barrio, the impulse to protest never rendered a meaning to art; his proposal of a Third World aesthetic oriented against materials of industrial origin, which were inaccessible to him, was due to the fact that, in his own words, 'creation cannot be conditional, it must be free." – In: *Op. cit.*, p. 62.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>9</sup> Or the "guerilla art" generation (Walace Rodrigues), "the barbarians of a new race" (Federico Morais), "the Barricades Generation" ("Geração Tranca-Ruas", Francisco Bittencourt); see Walace Rodrigues' complete study entitled "Arte de guerrilha e sua poética de contestação da ditadura militar no Brasil: Os casos de Cildo Meireles e Artur Barrio," Claudia Calirman – *op. cit.*, p. 99, and Tamara Silva Chagas – "Situação T/T1…," p. 139. As members of this generation, Claudia Calirman names, along Barrio, Cildo Meireles, Antonio Manuel, Umberto Costa Barros, Raymundo Colares, Alfredo Fontes, Luiz Alphonsus de Guimarães, Cláudio Paiva, Thereza Simões, and Guilherme Magalhães Vaz.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>10</sup> **Tamara Silva Chagas.** "Artur Barrio: O potencial...," p. 24.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>11</sup> **Artur Barrio.** "Textos, manifestos e um «texto mais recente»," p. 140.

Dadaist echoes are evident, as are Marxist influences; Artur Barrio's virulent criticism targets art as a reflection of a polarized society, as a domain reserved for the elites, as a deeply anachronistic phenomenon, an expression of inflexible power relations. The abandonment of the established forms of expression is the prerequisite for the necessary renewal of arts, whereby it may redefine its civic, critical, and political function. As a Brazilian artist and as a citizen of the Third World, Barrio argues in favour of inexpensive materials, of those that are available to him in his social and economic context, refusing to allow his artistic practice to be conditional upon the use of financially prohibitive materials: "[...] I use perishable, cheap materials in my work, such as: garbage, toilet paper, urine, etc." This simple choice leads to an *in integrum* challenge of the arts system and to horizons open to a new poetics, which he starts to explore in his creation.

Beyond the already-mentioned influences, the exegesis has identified numerous others in his artistic view<sup>13</sup>, a genuine cocktail of suggestions, ideas, and practices borrowed from: the Paris Situationists<sup>14</sup>, the conceptualists<sup>15</sup>, the representatives of Arte Povera<sup>16</sup>, of extreme body art and of the Viennese Actionism<sup>17</sup>, from the Fluxus group, from Vito Acconci, Chris Burden, Ana Mendieta, Antônio Manuel<sup>18</sup>, from the New Brazilian Cinema, or from Piero Manzoni<sup>19</sup>. It should be noted that, beyond all such influences and labelling as "the most daring and provocative artist" of the AI-5 Generation "to face the Brazilian dictatorship"<sup>20</sup>, Barrio has asserted himself over the decades (since the 1960s until today) as one of the most innovative, original, and protean contemporary Brazilian artists.

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The *bloody bundles* emerged in 1969 as the iconic productions of Barrio's early career, first exhibited at the Salão da Bússola. These were objects made of various mixtures of inexpensive materials or waste, placed both on museum premises and in the public area. An essential part of such objects consisted of organic matter, namely meat, bones, and blood of animal origin, which stained the wrapping cloth and decomposed, giving off a pungent stench and rendering the presence of the *bundles*, impossible to ignore and forget. These perishable objects referenced the torture and the assassinations that were taking place in prison cells and interrogation rooms; moreover, they subrogated the bodies of the missing political opponents.<sup>21</sup> Due to their aggressive presence, violent upon the senses, they are probably the harshest artistic reactions in response to the military regime's repressive actions.<sup>22</sup>

We must note that not all these *bundles* were conceived as perishable objects-installations-actions, i.e., as temporary. The prototype *bundles*, created in 1969 from fabric and paint, tied with rope, are perennial artistic objects – in fact, the only ones that are still in circulation.<sup>23</sup> They are an exception to Barrio's practice, oriented towards transient interventions, towards continuously changing installations or, rather, to decaying ones, to happening, and to performance (with or without an audience).

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>12</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 141.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>13</sup> Some of these, which connect him to Lygia Clark and to Hélio Oiticica, for instance, he denied; see Fernanda Pequeno. *Op. cit.*, p. 720, and Claudia Calirman. *Op. cit.*, p. 84.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>14</sup> **Moacir dos Anjos.** "A teia, uma situação e o que pode a arte: A cidade e o desenho nas obras de Lygia Pape e Artur Barrio," p. 93.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>15</sup> **Tamara Silva Chagas.** "Situação T/T1…," p. 138; Artur Freitas. "O tempo como profanação: 'Situações mínimas' de Artur Barrio," p. 178.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>16</sup> **Tamara Silva Chagas.** "Situação T/T1...," p. 138; Tamara Silva Chagas. "Artur Barrio: O potencial...," p. 25.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>17</sup> Fernanda Negrete. Op. cit., p. 58.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>18</sup> **Bruno Gomes de Almeida.** "Rastros de subjetividade em Artur Barrio," p. 411.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>19</sup> Claudia Calirman. Op. cit., pp. 82, 87.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>20</sup> *Ibidem*, pp. 99, 113.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>21</sup> Camila Maroja. *Op. cit.*, pp. 23, 26.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>22</sup> Claudia Calirman. Op. cit., pp. 89–90.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>23</sup> *Ibidem*, pp. 106–107.

We will briefly review Barrio's most significant projects from the years of intense repression by the dictatorial regime. In the already mentioned Salão da Bússola, in 1969, less than one year after the enactment of AI-5, Barrio exhibited a *bloody bundle* (*Situation... ORHHH... or... 5,000... B.B.... IN... N.Y... City*<sup>24</sup>) in one of the halls of the prestigious Museum of Modern Art in Rio de Janeiro, with the purpose of shocking visitors, but also of allowing them to intervene on the object and thus to become involved in the creation process. After exhibiting it for one month, Barrio himself had a new intervention on the *bundle*, adding meat and repositioning it, this time in the museum's yard – an area dedicated to sculptures. Upon referral by the police, the *bloody bundle* was collected by the city's sanitation services<sup>25</sup>, ending its lifecycle in a perfectly Barrian manner.

The gardens of the Rio de Janeiro Museum of Modern Art also hosted the action entitled P...  $H...^{26}$ , which was even closer to the poetics of the ephemeral: the artist waved toilet paper bands in the air and then left them to melt in the ocean waves.<sup>27</sup>

In 1970, Barrio continued his interventions in the public area, involving the placement of mixtures of organic and inorganic matter, this time at a much larger scale: he dispersed no less than 500 transparent plastic bags filled with "blood, nails, saliva, hair, urine, excrement, bones, toilet paper, tampons, used cotton, film negatives" throughout Rio de Janeiro (Defl...Situation... + S+...STREETS...). Such marking of the social area with garbage and faeces is seen as a transformation of the scatological into, in Barrio's own words<sup>28</sup>, "centres of accumulative energy, with varying temperatures."

With *Situation T/T1*, we reach the culmination of Artur Barrio's political criticism. This is one of the most violent artistic interventions in the public area, a testimony on the torturing of political opponents by the repressive agencies of the military dictatorial regime, as well as on the practice of dispensing with the victims' lifeless bodies, as they were thrown "in remote areas, like the ocean, lakes, or rivers." Barrio restaged these atrocities during the *Do Corpo à Terra* art exhibition of 1970 in Belo Horizonte<sup>30</sup> by placing 14 *bloody bundles* made of meat, bones, fabric and rope on the banks of a river (Ribeirão Arrudas, in the Municipal Park<sup>31</sup>), revealing "the collective traumatic situation of Brazil." It is estimated that around 5,000 people had seen the *bundles* before they were collected by the police and sent to a laboratory for testing.<sup>33</sup>

With 4 Days 4 Nights, a performance without an audience, Barrio took to the utmost consequences the idea according to which "the work totally coincides with the experience of the artist, it begins and ends with it." Over the interval indicated by the title, the artist walked the streets of Rio de Janeiro to the point of exhaustion, testing the acuity of his perceptions and how they changed along the chaotic journey – an exercise that was a genuine exploration of the realm on the border between reality, art, and madness. The 4 Days 4 Nights project can be considered an artistic interaction with the urban environment, as well as with the art of others, as Barrio intervened on a work exhibited by Cláudio Paiva during

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>24</sup> The names of these projects are usually syncopated, long, and complicated, equally suggesting and concealing their sense and their purpose.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>25</sup> Claudia Calirman. Op. cit., pp. 84–85; see also Fernanda Pequeno. Op. cit., p. 723.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>26</sup> From *Papel Higiênico*; see Claudia Calirman. *Op. cit.*, p. 85.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>27</sup> Claudia Calirman. *Op. cit.*, p. 85.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>28</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 85; see also Bruno Gomes de Almeida. *Op.cit.*, p. 410.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>29</sup> Camila Maroja. *Op. cit.*, p. 27.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>30</sup> Do Corpo à Terra (curator: Frederico Morais) remains one of the benchmark artistic events for the assertion and evolution of the AI-5 Generation. Along with Artur Barrio's intervention, the happenings of Cildo Meireles and Décio Noviello were of crucial importance in defining the political protest.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>31</sup> Artur Freitas. Op. cit., p. 186.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>32</sup> Camila Maroja. *Op. cit.*, p. 27.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>33</sup> Claudia Calirman. *Op. cit.*, pp. 90–91; see also Tamara Silva Chagas. "Situação T/T1...," p. 138 and "Artur Barrio: O potencial...," p. 24.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>34</sup> **Alessio Fransoni.** "Artur Barrio: The sea and the difference between art and (art)work," p. 5.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>35</sup> Claudia Calirman. *Op. cit.*, pp. 96–97.

the National Salon of Modern Art.<sup>36</sup> Barrio's testimonies are the only source of direct documentation for the *4 Days 4 Nights* performance.<sup>37</sup>

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The above-mentioned projects convey a very complex poetics.<sup>38</sup> At their heart lies the creation of a so-called temporary artistic "situation," whose memory only survives in the spectators' mind (if an audience exists), in that of the author, or in a written or photographic record.<sup>39</sup> The dematerialization of the work of art is certainly not a novelty for the Brazilian neo-avant-garde of the 1960s and 1970s, as emphasized by Tamara Silva Chagas and Artur Freitas<sup>40</sup>; that sociocultural and artistic context saw a "generalized depreciation of the art work: a sort of aesthetic and ideological transgression, based on an overcoming of historic conditions and on the alleged conservative nature of cultural institutions." Exceeding its spatial condition as an object and incorporating the temporal dimension<sup>41</sup>, the work of art avoids the mechanisms of the market and the prospects of being turned into a commodity.<sup>42</sup>

What is original is the composition of the "cocktail" of characteristics whereby Barrio's art claims its place in the public area; it becomes insidious, intrusive, violent, explosive, sordid, testing the limits of representability<sup>43</sup>, leaving behind its author and its "artistic" nature (in some cases, the unaware audience does not even realize that Barrio's interventions belong to the "artistic" paradigm), desecrating the museum and the public areas<sup>44</sup>, creating memories that are hard to banish, marking reality, tending, in fact, to become part of life, of the experience.<sup>45</sup>

Starting from this very convergence between art and life, attempts have been made to provide a stylistic classification of the *bloody bundles*. Camila Maroja proposed the metonymy and metaphor categories<sup>46</sup>; Claudia Calirman also speaks of the *bundles* as a "metaphorical representation of torture."<sup>47</sup> Given that, in their most radical, culminating form, i.e., *Situation T/T1*, the *bundles* were perceived as *real*, *physical evidence* of political assassinations, we propound the term "simulacrum," as it seems to more accurately describe Barrio's intention to create the semblance of a reality which the *bundles* may subrogate, as long as their *actual* nature is not exposed. The *bundles* are "recreated" pieces of reality, "staged" so as to deceive the senses, to generate a strong impact and indelible memories, and to awaken people's conscience. They remain "forgeries," but ones that condemn the *reality* of the crimes committed and concealed by the government's repressive agencies. <sup>48</sup> Paradoxically, Barrio's simulacra replace reality, putting it in the spotlight and undermining it at the same time.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>36</sup> **Tamara Silva Chagas.** "Artur Barrio: O potencial...," p. 25.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>37</sup> **Debora Pazetto Ferreira; Cleverson Luiz Salvaro** – "Violadores do jogo: Um diálogo entre Artur Barrio e Vilém Flusser," p. 3; see also Claudia Calirman. *Op. cit.*, pp. 97–98.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>38</sup> "What could be simplistically seen as a model for a humble art, however, was in fact a very ambitious project for an all-encompassing aesthetics in the visual arts." – In: Claudia Calirman. *Op. cit.*, p. 82.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>39</sup> Fernanda Negrete. *Op. cit.*, p. 61.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>40</sup> **Tamara Silva Chagas.** "Artur Barrio: O potencial...," p. 23; Artur Freitas. *Op. cit.*, p. 178.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>41</sup> "During the enforcement of the AI-5, the artist's generation found itself caught between the liberating character of counterculture, on the one hand, and the repressive apparatus of the military dictatorship, on the other hand. Unable to intervene in the political practices and hindered from explicitly manifesting themselves through a critical art, some of the artists came to focus on elaborating new poetic practices, now oriented towards capitalizing on body and time, as if the explorations around deviant practices, although encrypted and ritualized, constituted a final subversive line of defence." – In: Artur Freitas. *Op. cit.*, p. 206.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>42</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 178.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>43</sup> Bruno Gomes de Almeida. *Op. cit.*, p. 407.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>44</sup> See Tamara Silva Chagas. "Artur Barrio: O potencial...," p. 23; Artur Freitas. *Op. cit.*, p. 179.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>45</sup> **Tamara Silva Chagas.** "Artur Barrio: O potencial...," pp. 24–25.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>46</sup> Camila Maroja. *Op. cit.*, pp. 25–27.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>47</sup> Claudia Calirman. Op. cit., p. 113.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>48</sup> "During a time of intense repression and police control exerted on the citizens' lives, encountering such objects in the public domain was equivalent to witnessing alleged evidence of a crime." – In: Bruno Gomes de Almeida. *Op. cit.*, pp. 410–411.

Despite its profoundly political nature, Barrio's art between 1969 and 1974 does not support any of the time's political projects, according to Fernanda Negrete.<sup>49</sup> This is a very important insight, as it helps define Barrio's view on arts and their critic role. In spite of its fierce and innovating nature, his art does not take on an ideologizing approach, but rather political in the broad sense. The *bloody bundles* "cannot be reduced to a narrow reading of political history," as Camila Maroja rightfully noted. They are part of Barrio's endeavour to assert himself as a neo-avant-garde artist and, at the same time, as a "critical citizen." <sup>50</sup>

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<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>49</sup> Fernanda Negrete. *Op. cit.*, p. 58.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>50</sup> Camila Maroja. *Op. cit.*, p. 23.

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