

## SIMULATIONS OF THE EXCEPTION – notes by an “ideal observer” Laymert Garcia dos Santos

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### SIMULATIONS OF THE EXCEPTION notes by an “ideal observer”

The present text is the result of my attendance, as a curator, of the process of creating artworks by the artists Leandro Lima & Gisela Motta for the itinerant exhibition of Prêmio CNI SESI Marcantonio Vilaça, from February 2007 through June 2008. But before we examine the matter, I should clarify the perspective from which it was conceived and written. That is, to start by the inclusion of the curator (from the configuration of the conception of the prize itself) in a particular point of view that directly affects his work. That is because whoever systematically follows for a certain period of time the evolution of the works becomes a kind of “ideal observer”. Not in the sense that he is ideal because he is the best of all but because, on the one hand, he can literally accede to the work in progress and, on the other hand, because he ideally ends up taking the place of that observer who can honestly dialogue with the artist, thus becoming part of the creation process itself, since his feedback will also be integrated as “material” in the elaboration. Thus, the “ideal observer” is the common observer brought inside the making of the artwork as yet another variable of the complexity that it mobilizes and expresses. The following notes should, therefore, be read as reflections of the visions of such observer, in successive and progressive approaches.

#### first approach – February 8, 2007

One of the basic traits in the production of Leandro Lima & Gisela Motta is the creation of singular situations that are presented through images or a play between images whose unusual, enigmatic or, in the words of Kiki Mazzucchelli, “strange” nature questions the observer and impels him to get involved with the event. But most of the times the created situation is not limited to a projection the observer watches, because many times he is either attracted inside a three-dimensional image, or it is the image itself that unfolds in the exhibiting room, including the observer in the field of action of the event. Therefore the works by the artists are frequently video or multimedia installations, they are the result of the creation of images and of space configuring situations – which can be natural and/or artificial, real and/or simulated, virtual and/or actual, preferably at a “frontier state” or a passage zone from one thing to the other. “These are works that express the tension that occurs in the transition from the physical space to the digital space and vice versa”, writes Mazzucchelli on the catalogue for the exhibition *Au-delà du Copan, Supernatural Urbanism*<sup>1</sup>. Therefore, the first approach of their works makes evident the need to explore more intensely the statute of the images in each work and the nature of the spaces created, in order to identify what potentials they comprise and how the series of works could determine a problematic that overpasses them.

At first it seems obscure to the critic the moving force for the production: anyway, one is certain that the works do not appeal to the observer’s intellect, they do not try to seduce him, and much less they attempt to “discuss” the technological medium they utilize or make the technical skill their strong point. In short: it seems that Leandro & Gisela construct situations aimed at the observer, to “install” him in them as directly as they can, because they want him to experience them. Therefore,

it's about a sensorial experience, more than merely a visual one, in a situation where everything is synthetic: the environment, the landscape, the image, as it was so well noted by André Brasil in his text "The Poetics of the Loop."<sup>2</sup>

#### second approach – April 20, 2007

A sketch for the exhibition is already outlined. In fact, this one seems to focus on works that problematize contemporary violence, by subtly confronting the observer with guns or images of guns that make visible and perceptible a state of things characterized by social scientists as being a state of emergency, or of exception. As if Gisela and Leandro captured an "atmosphere" that is rather diffuse but not less present, where urban war, terrorism, battlefields and videogames suggest the existence of a multifaceted field of conflicts, where the reality of the simulation insistently evokes its counterpart in the present time. Thus everything is a game, everything can be seen as a play (even one of dark humor!) – but behind the innocent appearance, or better, the innocence itself with which the image of violence is presented, the imminence of a "passage à l'acte" pulsates, if we were to use a Freudian terminology.

#### third approach – September 19, 2007

On this opportunity four works were problematized, works that were in different phases of execution and were considered both individually and in their combined articulation. It was noticed that our ambiguous relation with a "permanent state of exception", a non-declared nor assumed state of war, is the common substratum to all of them, since the situations created remind the observer of the explosive and/or violent nature itself of the contemporary condition, although such violence seems to be filtered or des-realized through our familiarity with the images and how we cross, unawares, from the images of reality to the reality of images. At this point, the video installation I.E.D. – Improvised Explosive Device, was almost finished; armas.obj was in a state of material elaboration; the multimedia installation Alvo was past the conceptualizing phase; and Tanque na Cidade was being outlined as a project to complete the series. As you can see, the issue of war passes through all of them. But I must indicate another variant of the same problematic: by this time, Leandro & Gisela were already working on the series Foreign Element, because the video installation Enquadrado showed images of people detained by the police on the streets, images that were applied, or better yet, "installed" on the landscape of Helsinki so they could capture the reaction of the Finnish people to that insertion in their urban environment.

At this point, maybe because the exhibition was already taking form, the curator could notice that, while his attendance work evolved, his interlocution with the artists deepened. As if a mutual trust and a better understanding of what's into play in the work of both parties had granted us an increasing freedom to approach the implications of the many options that emerge in the process of creation and of reception. That was when it seemed to the critic that he was acting like some sort of "ideal observer" by reflecting and refracting conceptual issues, impressions, sensations,

associations, “findings” and technical-aesthetical details that are originated by the movement itself of a creation that is becoming solid and taking form.

#### fourth approach – October 10, 2007

Back to Brasília, where we went to visit Museu da República, the first stop of the itinerant exhibition, it became clear that the challenge now was the insertion of the works in each exhibition, in order to maximize their reception, and what could be written for the catalogue. That is, just like art can only be complete when it offers itself to the public, also the work of the “ideal observer” can only be successful with the explanation of the result of his encounter with the artists. It was time, then, to write about the artworks.

#### fifth approach – July 12–13, 2008

Let's go to them.

armas.obj – The label by the artwork explains: files of 3D guns were extracted from videogames, printed on paper and reconstructed in real size. They are, therefore, virtual guns that are updated, ones that get out of the screen and into the three-dimensional space, ones that come to life, to existence, as objects. Simulations of guns that present themselves as real guns, ones that are real while being unreal, that are material while being immaterial. Leandro & Gisela invert the operation to which we are used, when we go from the so-called world of life (but not in the Habermasian sense) to a virtual existence. The guns are fantastically real: armas.obj. But they are, at the same time, phantasmically real, because they express the imaginary of the players as it is reflected by the corporations that make the games. In this sense, they constitute a kind of inventory of the killing machines that the gun market produces and sells, and which are ambiguously appropriated by the entertainment industry. Nonetheless, we must not forget that these images are no longer in the game, since they were extracted from it – to enter in what other game? Simply in the aesthetic game of playing criminal in the real world, a perverse game that only and effectively reveals itself in the hands of a collector who can afford it – armas.obj is a work constituted as a collectible arsenal. We already know, therefore, to whom it is destined and we know its character. But, at the same time, we realize that armas.obj is playing a double game. Because if, on one side, it intends that the images are taken as things by their owner, on the other side, as if on another board, parallel to the first one, it affirms, permanently, that it is pure design, the design of a virtual-actual interaction whose purpose was planned to seize the observer by manipulating his potential to become an outlaw. Of course this second game happens in the dimension of simulation. In it, nevertheless, who deals the cards, or better yet, who makes the game, contrary to what one might suppose, is not the user, but who conceives and designs the rules – the rules of the interaction experience. Thus, armas.obj constructs and deconstructs our relation with the guns and with armas.obj. At this pace, the image of the guns, a central point of the work, affirms itself as the interface between the conception and the object, as an operator of the transformation of ideas, projects, intentions, calculations and projections (in the sense of designer-user) in the exchange of affections, emotions, engagements,

commitment and also projections... of a different nature, of course (in the inverted sense). As if it was about trading calculations for desire, quantity for quality, abstraction for intensity; in short, political economy for libidinal economy.

The game is double, but so are the guns; not only because they are image and thing, but because they are, still and simultaneously, image and concept. By going the opposite way to what's established in the virtual-actual relation, Leandro and Gisela present and expose the whole game, that is, the entire process that goes from the abstraction to the thing, passing through the image. Which is equivalent to arming-disarming our perception.

Maybe this is really the strongest signification in the work by the artists: a kind of constant experimentation of the arming-disarming of the perception through the new digital technologies. The aimed result is, most of the times, a poetic expression, and even a lyrical one, of this cocking-uncocking, just like it happens in *Passei-o*, so well analyzed by José Wenceslau Caminha Aguiar Jr.,<sup>3</sup> or even in *Lótus # 1*. In each of these cases, the processes are different, but the principle is always the same: the passage through image, that is its own configuration, presupposes the activation of a certain kind of intermediation that embraces the vision, one that captures and subdues it (be it a voluntary or involuntary submission). Implied in the work of Leandro & Gisela is a whole logistics of perception, not particularly in the sense granted to it by Paul Virilio – since for him the logistics of perception is always ruled by the imperative and by the dynamics of war and total mobilization –, but in the sense that it can also be ruled by other dynamics: love (*O Beijo*), desire (*Lótus # 2*), work (*Demolidora, Transportadora e Construtora Ilimitada*) and above all by the immanent dynamics of the technical object. In fact, in the latter case, it is important to explore how the cocking-uncocking is articulated both in the observer's eye and the eye of the camera, but also in the monitor, in the computer, in the projector and even in the cables, that is, in the machine and the technological device used. Going back, however, to the cases when the logistics of perception directly refers to war: besides the artworks here analyzed, the banner *iRock* for the Blog of Prêmio Sergio Motta de Arte e Tecnologia was a development of *armas.obj* in a new direction. Inspired by the typical Internet advertisements, the artists substituted the original images by images of guns and missiles overlapping the original phrases of the Apple ads. The result is a controversial piece, between cynical and impertinent, which frauds and deviates the investment on one of the most coveted objects of desire of young people, the iPod. "The idea is an advertisement selling products with an 'Apple' aesthetics, where all the phrases were taken from the company's own site and which, seen from this point of view, seem to have been created specifically for these products. They are somewhat ambiguous, hopeful", says Gisela at the site of the prize.

**I.E.D. Improvised Explosive Device** – In this video installation you can see and hear a heart which accelerates and expands to a point where it almost explodes, and then it decelerates. It is, however, the modulation of an internal movement which, in fact, cannot be refrained. But, paradoxically, the explosion never comes to occur. How can someone, then, conceive such inconceivable heart? In fact, we are before an improvised explosive device which "works" apparently like a heart: but it is, at the same time, a gathering of homemade bombs that actually exploded. Thus, the intervention of

Leandro and Gisela consists in creating the conditions for capturing, in the images of the bombs that explode, the contours, the pulsations, the brightness and the lights of a “vivified” inorganic matter that is about to disintegrate.

In fact, the components of the homemade bombs shaped like a heart – cigarette packs, cell phones, soda cans, vitamin bottles, paper envelopes, detergent and cooking oil plastic bottles were bound with tape to bundle the whole set in a living, animated organ. A poetical evocation of the terrorist? A metaphor of the condition of the bomb-wielding man? Or of the ordinary man of the big city, as the familiar forms of the consumable products suggest? A metaphor of the body and the spirit of the inhabitant of São Paulo, stressed to his limit? It is important that the heart will explode without actually doing it... having exploded nevertheless, as each of us can paradoxically see without seeing! The restraint of the expansion provokes the reversal of our expectation in the exact moment when we hope the explosion will succeed. Thus an agony takes over the observer, thrown in the contradictory movement that is established between an explosion that actually occurs in the level of the object and a restraint that happens in the level of the image editing. Stressed to the extreme by such movement, taking the image by the thing itself, the observer is not able to determine the occurrence, stunned by the constant dislocation and by the mutual conversion of the explosion into restraint and of the restraint into expansion.

The loop, in this case, expresses a circular situation that evokes what happened in *Trabalhando em círculos*, in *Voando em círculos* and in *Andando em círculos*. But there the machines turned around in space, always ahead but nevertheless always turning back, in a vicious circle. Here the heart turns aimlessly, exploding-not exploding, endlessly pumping the bomb in an infinite present of a limit-situation that does not go away.

Alvo – This is a work that dialogues with the others in the series, not only because it also focus on violence, but above all because it directly involves the observer in the logistics of perception (now in the sense explored by Virilio), by turning him into an object that's viewed and easily hit, as soon as he enters the field of action of the gun-camera. What happens? By stepping inside the exhibiting room, the body of the observer is exposed to a camera connected to a computer whose software, through a process called tracking, decodes the coordinates of the observer in space and allows this information to be used so that the symbol of a target is projected on him and starts following him, as the subject moves around.

The device is only set, and therefore only then it reveals itself, when someone enters the performing field of the work. Selective, it was programmed to project the target on one visitor at a time, choosing the one who moves about the most. We are, therefore, facing a detection system that, by simulating in the exhibiting room a police or military search operation, transforms the observer into an analogous of the victim of a police raid, when he doesn't know the reason and the purpose of such interpellation. Thus, the electronic device is configured as an automatic arresting equipment whose non-human perception of the environment and of the animated beings that move around in it

reconfigures the exhibiting room as a conducting space for the hyper-technological control. Now the observer finds out he can no longer be the aesthete invited to serenely contemplate the explosion-non explosion of the bomb-heart, and not even the player asked to play the outlaw – put under suspicion according to a criteria he does not know, he is turned into a puppet for a power play that is unfathomable.

The aesthetic game in the universe of simulation suggests that the same technologies that produce ludic images are also good to put us on the target line, therefore they serve to kill. The synergy between the artworks is getting more intense. From the image of I.E.D. to the space in Alvo, passing through the virtuality-actuality of armas.obj, there is a whole trajectory that comes and goes, informing the experience of the observer and problematizing the situations of exception in which he finds himself.

The project of one last artwork still remains, one planned to be produced in Recife, during a residency of the artists at MAMAM. It is again a new simulation, this time with war tanks (the plastic scale models, those perfect miniatures which appeared after World War II, were employed in simulations and practices and are now commercialized by many brands, like Revell). In the video, two radio-controlled tanks roam about two distinct landscapes as if they were looking for each other, maybe in a confrontation search; but since they do not meet, the war makes no sense, although the mobilization continues. Therefore, the state of exception.

Laymert Garcia dos Santos

1. MAZZUCHELLI, Kiki, *Au-delà du Copan Supernatural Urbanism*, 2005, École Nationale Supérieure des Beaux-Arts, ISBN: 2-84056-187-5.
2. BRASIL, André. "A Poética do Loop." Dossier, jul. 2004. <<http://www.videobrasil.org.br/ffdossier/ffdossier004/portugues.htm>>.
3. In *O homem seu olhar holoscópico e seus naôis*, Doctorate thesis, Rio de Janeiro: Programa de Pós-graduação em Linguagens Visuais at EBA/UFRJ.