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During the years in which Walter Zanini directed the Museum of Contemporary Art of the University of São Paulo (MAC USP), he operated isolated from the local critics (who understood little or nothing of many of his proposals).¹ Driven by artists who, together with him, organized group exhibitions in Brazil and elsewhere, he propelled the use of the museum towards the development of projects, courses, and conferences, turning it into a forum of debates. He believed that artistic work should be connected to its context and that exhibitions should be organically attached to their time. The *Jovem Arte Contemporânea* (young contemporary art; JAC) series of exhibitions that Zanini organized between 1967 and 1974 was created within this spirit during Brazil's military dictatorship. Initiated in the 1960s these exhibitions share some characteristics with a

singular moment in the international context of exhibition making. However, due to the dictatorship, these similarities have a different meaning. Contrary to May 1968 in France, where students were turning against institutions such as the museum, in São Paulo, MAC USP kept its doors open and functioned as a real free territory for artists, students, teachers, and whoever went there. By the end of that year, the censorship of arts became even tighter in Brazil, with cinema, theater, and music the areas that most suffered. In the university, the collection of "masterpieces" assured the stability of the museum, connecting it to the past and confirming the conservative expectations of the average public in its traditional conceptions of the museum, the work of art, and the artist. On the other hand, Zanini's work continued to move farther away from those common

NOTES

1—MAC USP was created in 1963 with the donation of the collection of industrialist Francisco Matarazzo Sobrinho and his wife Yolanda Penteadto to the University of São Paulo. This initial collection was composed of masterpieces of international artistic importance, namely works by Modigliani, Boccioni, Picasso, Ernst, and De Chirico, along with Brazilian modern and contemporary artists. The works acquired in the beginning of the Bienal de São Paulo also contributed to the museum's collection. From 1960 to 1970, under Walter Zanini's direction, MAC USP stood up for experimental exhibitions with Brazilian and foreign artists' participation and kept from these programs the most important collection of conceptual art in Brazil. The collection of MAC USP comprises over ten thousand works today. It is a university and public museum with one of the most important collections of modern and contemporary art in South America.

2—Zanini's exhibitions included *Prospectiva 74* (1974), an exhibition focused on mixed-media artistic production, *Poéticas Visuais* (1977), which featured more than two hundreds artists from all over the world, and *Video Art* (1975) and *Multimedia II* (1976), focusing on new technologies, to name just a few. International artists include Krzysztof Wodiczko, Antoni Muntadas, Valcárcel Medina, Jaroslaw Kozłowski, Wolf Vostell, Dick Higgins, Ben Vautier, and Klaus Rinke.

expectations and forecast the future of art focused on ideas, processes, and concepts. This work made the museum not a collection of lifeless works or an important building but a gesture rich in meaning, introducing to it other notions and experiences.

Zanini's exhibitions were built on some innovative curatorial practices that were at the time anti-canonical but may now be defined as seminal. By enhancing the exchange between artists, Zanini inserted the museum in an international network that generated several exhibitions and allowed the incorporation of new works from international contemporary artists to the collection.² These exhibitions and works solidified the internationalization of what used to be a peripheral museum. As for the work of the local artists, it is important to remark that in many of their projects both the impermanence of media and the precariousness of the used materials, cheap and easy to find, provided critical alternatives in face of the socio-economical reality of Latin America. Some artists in Brazil felt the need to establish a contrasting relation between the economic value of these materials and the privileged economic circuits of the art world. The public needed to become more permeable to these poetic and political transformations and needed to adopt a far less conservative attitude, one that was more inventive and thoughtful. The passive condition that marked the daily reality of those hard years of dictatorship was not to be reproduced in the museum.

Many of the exhibitions that Zanini organized passed uncensored as they were incomprehensible during the dictatorship, but still today his pioneering work remains mostly unknown—although recently he became an important reference for the new generation of Brazilian curators. Encouraging experimentation in the exhibition, Zanini suspended given notions of a

canonic—and exclusionary—history of art, at the same time that he questioned the institutional places for creation and exhibition.

The sixth JAC (1972), for example, declared its goal of widening the ambit of the exhibition, turning it into a true manifestation in an epoch in which any gathering in public, even the reunion of a small number of people, was forbidden.

Within the military regime, this exhibition/manifestation operated as a true experimental exercise of freedom. Conventional criteria for the inclusion of artists were abolished: Participation was raffled off and the exhibition space of the museum was divided into lots, which were drawn and traded among those enrolled. The audience could follow everything from the beginning, once the exhibition opened and the whole poetic and political process started.

Such a process may seem disconcerting due to the chaos that invaded the aseptic environment of the museum as a result. In this process, what was previously beforehand planning of the space and the executive power of the museum director/curator opened to decisions made collectively among the participants and a dissolved distinction between artist and public.

To reflect upon his exceptional curatorial positioning and go further inside the context of his exhibitions, I held several interviews with Zanini between 2008 and 2010. The following conversation combines extracts of those interviews that comment the specific case of the sixth JAC exhibition.

Cristina Freire: *In the 1960s and 1970s, artists incorporated new media and techniques into their work and demanded higher participation in the museum, while Brazil was living under a military dictatorship. In that context, how did you conceive the sixth JAC?*

Cover of the catalogue of the Sixth Jovem Arte Contemporânea exhibition, Museu de Arte Contemporânea da Universidade de São Paulo, 1972

6.ª EXPOSIÇÃO

JOVEM ARTE CONTEMPORÂNEA



MUSEU DE ARTE CONTEMPORÂNEA

da Universidade de São Paulo



3—The exhibition began with an open call, including convocational letters and advertisements in the press and in public spaces. On the opening day the exhibition space was divided into small lots drawn between all the artists interested in participating in the exhibition. The regulations of the exhibition emphasized the inexistence of barriers to the artist's participation; the only two requirements were first, the presentation of a written project, to be publicly discussed, evidencing the basic intentions of each possible work and, second, the mandatory occupation of the space allotted.

Walter Zanini: The sixth edition of the annual exhibition dedicated to young generations had some innovations. We altered the previous versions' regulations and structure by transferring emphasis on the work to the process, and cancelling the selection of the participating artists. We proposed to the participants a program of activities that turned the museum into the center of those activities. With the theoretical and practical contribution of artist Donato Ferrari and the participation of sociologist Raphael Buongiorno Netto and visual programmer Laonte Klawa, we created a sequence of different lots in the temporary exhibition area of the museum. The accepted applications were selected by chance (as we could not host all the candidates).³

After the allotment of the eighty-four available places, their "owners" presented written proposals—many of

conceptual nature—and started following the arranged timing for the daily development of the exhibition and its final presentation. An open debate for the evaluation of the results was arranged for the closing session. Within this scheme more than two hundred artists worked in the museum during two weeks, both individually and as teams, producing their varied proposals with a variety of media and materials. However, this attribution of spaces—a challenge for the artists who needed to work on those areas according to a predetermined schedule—did not mean their definitive possession. One of the conditions of participation of the 1972 JAC clearly specified the "verification of the program of work" and even the "eventual cancellation of the lot" for those who did not observe the regulations. The participants were thus given an equal opportunity to develop their

ideas. The regulations even foresaw the exchange of the lots. Furthermore, many of those who were not selected by the lottery found a way of taking part in the event, mainly through the formation of teams. The collaborative spirit also allowed the inclusion of projects of absent artists.

CF: How was the public reception?

WZ: We really felt the presence of a great audience that was interested in the exhibition. There were also a great number of students, often participating or contributing alongside their teachers. The atmosphere was miles away from that of the artist's studio; it wasn't even similar to the juxtaposition of many studios. The situation was also very different from the research done in the closed domain of an art school or certain initiatives that tried to involve the public in the artistic manipulation of materials. It was even distant from the atmosphere created by temporarily giving a space to invited artists. What was created in a general way—something that the museum already was trying to do at least partially in previous projects—was to allow for a wide and direct bond between the artist and the museum that would subsequently bring the public closer to us both. It's also good to remember that many older and more established Brazilian and international artists took part in the exhibition and adhered to the rules of the game, being enthusiastic about the project and the opportunity to present themselves alongside younger generations. The negative criticism from the local press, which did not understand the exhibition/manifestation or simply refused to accept it, contrasted with the huge number of visitors: almost one thousand people attended the opening day.

CF: How was the exhibition space configured?

WZ: We created a dynamic field of experiences in the outskirts of the museum's historical collection. This allowed a new dialogue between museum, artist, and public, generating new configurations of all these elements. The individual works, installations, and projects had less significance when compared to the whole event. What we saw was the creation of a great, vital, and revealing atmosphere.

CF: For the 1972 IAC the jury was abolished and the traditional awards ceremony budget was turned into research budget that, due to a common decision of the participants at the end, was used

Exhibition views of the Sixth Jovem Arte Contemporânea exhibition, Museu de Arte Contemporânea da Universidade de São Paulo, 1972



for the production of a catalogue of the exhibition. Where does this exhibition fit in the context of general reflection on the museum?

WZ: The dimensions of the art museum were already changing. In this specific case the display and collecting purposes were undisputed priorities. In terms of MAC USP, we thought that the tasks should extend in a prospective way: It should become a research center, continuously attentive to the pre-defined structure but also conscious of the development of new creative processes, not only an organ of collectivity but also an agent of transformation. It could become the co-author side by side with the artist, in the development of new resources of communication such as video. The artist, conscious of his own bond with social reality, works via experimentation, and his solutions, as it happens in scientific research, come as an open, ongoing process of development. The structure of the museum should allow this, as it is an organ engaged with the inner act of creativity. For both museum and artist this new *modus vivendi* would represent a possibility for integration and subsequent affirmation as an agent of transformation of the social universe.

CF: How was the international debate important for this concept of the museum?

WZ: Certainly the frequent conferences promoted by the International Committee for Museums and Collections of Modern Art (CIMAM) that I attended in the 1960s and 1970s were the main stage of that issue. Also in the early 1960s the International Council of Museums meetings promoted access to ideas I expanded on later.

I remember that in 1963, during a meeting in Paris run by Jean Cassou with René D'Harnoncourt, Pontus Hultén, Franz Meyer, Werner Hofmann, and

others, we discussed theses such as the need of museums of modern art to "face all the possibilities of relation with the artists." During the subsequent general renovation of museums of modern art such relations were systematically revised. At the 1969 meeting of CIMAM in Brussels there was a real duel between Hofmann, Pierre Gaudibert, Ryszard Stanislawski, and other directors I felt close to on one side and museologists who defended conservative ideas on the other. In my opinion the conference in Poland in 1972 was one of the greatest moments of debate, focused on the theme "The Museum of Modern Art and the Artists."

We spoke about society's dues to the artist and raised the question of legal property of the work of art. The Poland meeting was also for us participants and directors an opportunity to assist at the Museum of Art of Łódź—one of the first museums of this kind in Europe—during its internal dispute between the "museum temple" and "museum forum" approaches. There, Donato Ferrari and I presented the outline of the sixth JAC to the plenary. The 1960s were fundamental to open and differentiated perspectives on the definition of the museum. In São Paulo, in the early 1970s, the Museum of Contemporary Art of the University of São Paulo became a unique center of (international) activity in the city for artists that exhibited there, offering them freedom from the anguish and repression of the military dictatorship devastating the country.

CF: What resulted from those years and what did it mean in terms of programming for the museum?

WZ: It was not about making an "exhibition" to be seen in just five minutes or the solemn opening night. It was the sort of event that needed to be followed and experienced throughout its



existence and its daily growth, via the dialogue of one work with another. It required a quest for comprehension of each attitude and each communication, however hermetic or naive it might be, and the understanding of its results and frustrations. All because we opened the doors to the public on the same day in which the artists started doing their projects. Thus the visitors could take part in the making of the works, talking with and even helping the artists. This collaborative installation lasted for about two weeks. Even the triviality of certain proposals was made significant in the context of a drama, rarely transmitted by an exhibition.

The sixth JAC was an exhibition largely connected to daily existence. Even the lack of integration by a few works and artists did not affect the overall result. For such a new kind of experience as the 1972 JAC it was normal to have some amount of incomprehension: a critic even thought that the museum was superficial in its placement of a pianist at the entrance of the exhibition space to provide background music to those working on their projects. But this was not ambient music; it was a project by Jannis Kounellis. ■

Exhibition view of the Sixth Jovem Arte Contemporânea exhibition, Museu de Arte Contemporânea da Universidade de São Paulo, 1972