
Book Review: *Art Systems: Brazil and the 1970s*

Art Systems: Brazil and the 1970s, by Elena Shtromberg. Austin: University of Texas Press, 2016. 210 pp., 32 color and 41 b/w illus. \$29.95 (paperback), ISBN 978-1477308585

Art Systems joins a growing group of books focused on postwar Brazilian art by US-based art historians, such as Claudia Calirman's *Brazilian Art under Dictatorship: Antonio Manuel, Artur Barrio, and Cildo Meireles* (2012), and Irene Small's *Hélio Oiticica: Folding the Frame* (2016). Until the publication of these titles, art historical studies of Latin American art in the United States had focused on two moments of its "modernity": the colonial period, and the late nineteenth century through the 1920s. Latin American art remained notoriously non-contemporary for the discipline. These books opened a new art historical horizon.

Elena Shtromberg's analysis stands out in a number of ways. First, the book is not organized around specific artists or case studies, but divided into four chapters that describe "the texture of social life" of the 1970s as it made its way through four distinct systems: currency, newspapers, television, and maps. Second, *Art Systems* is distinct from its peer books in that it draws heavily on scholarship from outside art history, pursuing the thesis that an art object should be studied "as a complex organism to be addressed as a network of relationships" (8), allowing Shtromberg to engage in a broader analysis of Brazilian life in the 1970s under dictatorship. *Art Systems* is a brilliantly lucid, well-written rereading of major and minor artists from the period and will be of interest to scholars of global conceptualism, political art, contemporary art, Brazilian studies, and Latin American studies. The breadth and range of its analysis is impressive.

Shtromberg's framework is rooted in systems theory, adapted to a social history of Brazilian art during the decade of harshest authoritarian rule during the dictatorship, which lasted from 1964 to 1984. Each chosen system operates in at least two ways in her compelling analysis: each was appropriated, mimicked, and transgressed by a number of artists during the 1970s, and each was exploited

by the military dictatorship to structure and exercise its undemocratic abuse of power. Shtromberg chooses this material and conceptual framework because her aim is to show how numerous artists in Brazil sought to engage the public outside of art institutions. Systems of exchange, representation, and communication were the pathways through which they operated outside the closed-off spaces of official art. In this way, Shtromberg's work is not only a brilliant study of Brazilian politicized art, but also (without explicitly claiming to be so) a major intervention into the larger field of global conceptualism.

The rampant hyperinflation that marked the period is studied alongside Cildo Meireles's banknote works (*Zero Dollar, Zero Cruziero, Árvore do dinheiro*) and ideological-circuit works (*Projeto Coca-Cola, Projeto cédula*). Shtromberg situates these interventions within the emergent conceptual practices of the time, particularly the use of language and visual poetry. Her analysis of Meireles's critique of the economic structure of politics sheds new light on the emergence of neoliberalism in the region. Alongside the internationally acclaimed Meireles, she also studies the work of lesser-known artists who placed their art into a monetary-like circulation, making use of graphics and poetry, like Unhandeijara Lisboa, Thereza Simões, and Paulo Miranda.

The second chapter explores how a number of artists and poets used Brazilian newspapers as their exhibition spaces during the 1970s. The coded language of visual poetry, the disturbance of classified ads with artistic messages, and the appropriation of press photographs by Meireles, Glauco Mattoso, Paulo Bruscky, Antonio Manuel, and others is considered alongside the newspapers' own editorial use of their highly censored pages. Newspapers were the strongest ideological platform for the military dictatorship, and in Shtromberg's view, it was because of exactly this that artists and intellectuals intervened in its system.

Brazilian Telecommunications Enterprises, known as Embratel, was established by the military government in 1965. Citing its motto, “Communications Is Integration,” Shtromberg shows how television, as the new media and system of the decade, became the vehicle for the military regime’s ideological expansion. Hélio Oiticica and Artur Barrio figure prominently as the first artists to introduce televisions into their work, famously in Oiticica’s 1967 *Tropicalia*. These uses become the pathway for Shtromberg’s subsequent look at the emergence of video art in Brazil during the 1970s. Through an analysis of Letícia Parente, Sonia Andrade, Paulo Herkenhoff, and Geraldo Anahia Mello’s videos, the television screen becomes a site for a critical reflection on mass media. The video work unearthed and examined by Shtromberg repeatedly staged the body as a site of physicality precisely through the apparatus that was constructing depoliticized, and therefore disembodied, subjects.

The most surprising chapter is the fourth and last one, which considers maps as a system of power dynamics and venue for artistic intervention. Shtromberg focuses in on three major transformations of space for Brazilian citizens in the 1970s—the construction of Brasília, the globally televised Apollo 11 spacecraft landing on the moon, and the forced resettlement of the Amazonian rainforest—and explains how artists like Anna Bella Geiger and Sonia

Andrade revealed the failure of advanced mapping systems, satellite technologies, and urban planning to contain space or represent lived experience. This chapter is surprising because, unlike newspapers, currency, and television, which we generally understand as systems of communication and circulation, maps have a longer history related to empire building that long predates any of these other categories. This is the strongest chapter because it reveals the ways in which today’s catastrophic destruction of the Amazonian rainforest is directly linked to the military dictatorship of the 1970s, and that the possible future of Brazil at the hands of a new neo-military takeover might finish off the largest tropical rainforest of the planet. The last sentence reads eerily: “Artistic production also stands as a significant testament of this historical moment, and it has been my contention throughout this book that a sustained and exhaustive analysis of artworks produced during this time reveals the legislative, economic, aesthetic, and technological relationships of this period, highlighting those legacies that endure into the future”. Where are the artists who might help us navigate Brazil’s present, and give us hope in the critical power of art? We’ll have to hope that Elena Shtromberg will soon write that book.

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