ART IN ITS RADICAL PERSPECTIVE *Arlindo Machado*

Simone Michelin's work is inscribed in a new field of significant practices that some call by *technological poetics* and that encompass all experiences of intersection between art, science and technology. In the last years we have seen around the world the multiplication of festivals, meetings, shows and cultural centers exclusively dedicated to experiences that happen in this point of intersection. In fact, artists increasingly employ the computer to create their images, songs, texts and environments; video is an almost unavoidable presence in any installation; the interactive incorporation of the responses of the public became a must for any artistic proposal that hopes to be updated and in alignment with the state-of-the-art of culture. Technological poetics lost the marginal and almost underground character they first had, and soon became the *new* hegemonic forms of artistic production.

Michelin's stance, nevertheless, is significantly different from the one taken by a great number of artists in relation to the appropriation of new technologies. Contrarily to most of them, Michelin seems to emphatically refuse the apologetic discourses of technology, which tend to glorify the benefits of scientific progress, the promotion of consumerism and often the direct marketing of industrial products that usually take place in great part of the international events dedicated to the relations between art, science and technology. Her work moves in another direction, and can be characterized as critical, problematizing and divergent. In a country like Brazil, geographically displaced in relation to the producers of technology and where the access to technological goods is still selective and discriminatory, a serious approach to these new technologies must necessarily reflect such displacement and difference, and this is what characterizes Michelin's production. Hers is a work of corrosive irony and deconstructive will in relation to the power and control mechanisms of the technological society. In this sense, she reminds us of Waldemar Cordeiro, our greatest computational artist who always included a social commentary.

Let's start with the case of *Lilliput* (2005), originally conceived for an art and technology exhibition that inaugurated the former Centro Cultural Telemar, current Oi Futuro, in Rio de Janeiro. Since the sponsor was a telephone company, the artist decided to play with this and employ cell phone technology. She imagined a kind of "public square" (alluding to the fact that cell phones were becoming the new public square of the telematic world) where the public could circulate freely and placed in several points of this scenario some very large panels, on which she glued extremely blown-up photos. The treatment grained the images a great deal, granting them the aspect of an impressionist or pointillist painting, although compromising the images' legibility: it was impossible to figure out what was portrayed in them. In the areas where the faces of the supposed portrayed people would be, the artist made a hole, so that the heads of the visitors could fit in it. Trainees spread through the installation, employing cell phones, took photos of the visitors posing with their heads in the holes (and also encouraged people to take their own photos). These photos were later transferred to a computer and processed by the system, becoming virtual panoramas stored in a database waiting to be installed in mobile devices, besides being shown in the exhibition space. The whole material was available online and the website was an extension of the work in the cyberspace, which constituted yet another public domain. In the space of the installation, in the four versions of the work so far realized, there were always posters explaining that that was a public domain territory and those entering into play were agreeing in having their images under this regime of availability. The surprising element came at the time of looking to the photos. Due to the low resolution quality of the cell image and also to the small size of the camera screen, the image was compressed and thus lost its granulation, revealing the images represented there. The visitor then realized that his or her face was replacing the face of a beggar, for instance, in a free-food line. So what apparently was a playful game with multicolored figures is suddenly transformed into a tragic revelation: the drama of Rio de Janeiro's

homeless. And worse, the visitor was also involved in it, for he or she appears as a beggar amongst hundreds of them.

The reference to Lilliput, the city of little men (like the figures shown in the small screens of cell phone cameras) of Jonathan Swift's famous novel, is not gratuitous. Both England at the dawn of Enlightenment, and Brazil in the peak of cyberspace capitalism, have their losers, those who were not included, those who missed the boat, the little ones. In *Lilliput*, Michelin makes an intersection of social differences. The reality of those deprived of everything is outside the museum, but I'm also "there" in form of image, as "they" are in the museum, also in the form of image. It may be uncomfortable at first, but it is also a way of doing "safe tourism", a category increasingly applied to Rio de Janeiro: I'm going to visit the world of those who lack everything, but I'll do it via a virtual reality, sending there only my image, my avatar. *Lilliput* performs a complex game intercrossing the public and the private, I and the Other, identity and sociability, inside and outside. Basically, it raises the issue of belonging. Which side am I? Who is my group? Am I here as a guest? Am I just visiting this environment? In the worst case scenario, where do I find shelter? Who protects me? Where do I hide?

We also find this interpenetration of the inside and the outside, the public and the private, in another work by Michelin immediately before *Lilliput* called *ADA: Anarquitetura do Afeto* [ADA; *Anarchitecture of Affection*] (2004). Also projected for a biennial event of art and technology in São Paulo, the installation consists of, briefly, a large video monitor incrusted on one of the walls of the building holding the event, but with the screen facing the street. Therefore, in spite of being part of the exhibition, the work was not inside the space, but outside of it, exposed to the passerby in the street and not to the exhibition visitors. However, the work showed that which was inside the exhibition space or inside the building, thanks to the several security cameras spread through different areas of the space. That is, *ADA* offered the interior of the exhibition

and of the venue to the regard of any and every passerby. It is as if the building could become transparent and its interior entirely visible. In reality, with this work Michelin inverts the logic of vigilance. Normally we, ordinary citizens, are permanently exposed to security cameras (they are omnipresent now) in the most diversified kinds of institutions, but only a few operators in the building's security control room watch them. In *ADA* the situation is reverted: the very bowels of the institution (in this case, a cultural center sponsored by a bank) are exposed to the public, to the regard of the ordinary citizen.

This work was not easily accomplished, since it involved control and security issues, the revelation of inside departments and the exhibition of sectors never open to public visitation. It is as if it were possible to deconstruct the mechanism of vigilance through its inversion: now everyone watches everyone. Surely, it was quite uncomfortable for the institution to turn public, for instance, its directors' meeting room, where confidential issues are discussed and important decisions are taken. This possibility denied, the artist displaced the camera from the directors' meeting room to the cone of Paulista Ave., so that the institution's directory turned to be not the one being observed, but the one observing the street, in front of the cone. The security company hired by the cultural center refused to take part of it (the idea was the guards would wear tiny security cameras in their uniforms, so that the public could see what they were seeing). This refusal forced the artist to use a life-size manikin dressed as a guard, exactly like the real ones and placed where they are usually located. Evidently, the manikin wore a security camera. The idea, according to the artist herself, was to transform the inner video circuits in outer circuits and to exam how the public space may be a space of negotiations, naturally mediated by codes, between desire, need and chance.

Could the city be understood as the outside, the public side of our bodies? Are our bodies the private side, the interiorization of the city? Could the video, as mediation, function as an interface between the body and the city, the public and

the private, the inside and the outside, revealing symbiosis otherwise difficult to perceive? Instead of attempting to discern where exactly the public and private conditions meet and to operate from this separation, Simone Michelin's video *Araponga* (2001) opted for more ambiguous experiences, for intermediate stages as well as stages of contamination between inside and outside spaces. Originally conceived to be presented in a concerto situation (there are yet another two autonomous versions), to accompany Rodolfo Caesar's musical piece *Ranap-Gaô*, remotely inspired in the sound produced by the araponga [blacksmith bird], Michelin's video contrasts the prototype image of Rio de Janeiro, Christ, the Redeemer, with the anonymous images of its depersonalized inhabitants. Christ on top of the Corcovado Mountain and the sound of the blacksmith birds in Alto da Tijuca's forest are icons of a city that hide an invisible and violent reality in Rio de Janeiro's death rows. *Araponga* synthesizes the struggles that take place at the core of the city's globalized space, in which predominate, on one hand, ideas of tourism, control and vigilance and, on the other, ideas of self-exposition, transgression and death. In this video, Michelin presents subjective views of what means to live in the public space and become depersonalized within it, without losing, however, the traces that identify each one of us as unique. The third version of this video (with a soundtrack by the artist) shows the "araponga" as the delator, the one who denounces people to the police via telephone.

In the same line of *Araponga* there is another video by Michelin entitled *O Espírito do Rio* [The Spirit of Rio] (2007, reedited). In it the city of Rio de Janeiro is represented through some artistic performances, public festivities and street manifestations, shared by all. There is in this video a mix of ecstasy and terror, realism and surrealism, spectacle and deconstruction, truth and artifice, inebriation and criticism. Filming and editing interfere in the documental images, distorting, granulating, unfocusing, and pushing the images to the limits of visibility. The bodies and the city are seen here as the unfoldment of each other,

fields of reversibility and crossings, reciprocal inscriptions of the inside and the outside.

Lições Americanas [American Lessons] is a project extended from 1999 to 2002, encompassing several installations and single channel videos. The title is a reference to the posthumous book by Italo Calvino that tries to foresee the tendencies of the world for the 21st century. The project constitutes a kind of inner balance of the experience of the artist as foreigner, whether outside or inside Brazil. In other words: How is it possible to look at the world as someone from the outside, someone who is only passing and watches everything in a mix of fascination and terror? In several of his texts, Néstor Canclini proposes the use of the word *foreigner* in a ampler way, perhaps even in a metaphorical sense, as a manner to deal with the relations of estrangement, prejudice and sense of fear among social subjects, whether within or without a given geographic region. He also proposes the use of the term operations of *translation* to all attempts of approximation, conciliation and understanding among strangers or foreigners.

In the video *Lições Americanas HO HO HO* [American Lessons *HO HO HO*] (2002), for instance, the mega toy stores during Christmas season in New Your are transformed in a kind of circus of horrors: there are stuffed plush animals, gnomes, santa claus, robotic small cars and dolls piled up in crowed spaces, through which Michelin's camera travels in delirious *travelings* and obscene *foregrounds*, attempting to take advantage of the whole weirdness and nonsense of that universe. The chaotic mixture of such different things grants a surrealistic feeling to the place, and the somewhat macabre soundtrack, composed by Rodolfo Caesar, helps conveying a sense of estrangement. There is the place of boundless consumption, pre-Christmas hallucination, where everyone gets loads and loads of ugly, expensive and worthless things. We could image the stupefaction of a Martian who arrives on Earth for the first time and lands precisely in one of these stores.

The White Room (1999-2001), an installation that is also part of the project *Lições Americanas* [American Lessons], presents different plots in a combination of architectural and videographic spaces (the cyberspace will appear only in the last work of the series, *O Santinho* [The Hole Picture/ the little saint], in which there is a website as part of the system) and focus on the Brazilian economic crisis departing from the devaluation of the *Real* [the Brazilian currency] in 1999, as interpreted by the North-Americans. The events were recorded in Rio de Janeiro, New York, Philadelphia and Los Angeles, making an ironic comparison between the 1994 euphoria (when the *Real Plan* was implemented and when presidential elections led the Finances minister Fernando Henrique to the presidency and also the period of the Football World Cup) and the 1999 frustration and economic collapse. *The White Room* is specifically focused on the downfall of the *Real Plan*, but the historical period visited by the *Lições Americanas* [American Lessons] is extended to 2002, a year that repeats some situations experienced in 1994, such as the conquest of the World Cup (Brazil lost in 1998) and new presidential elections. These facts, that in Brazil generated a national commotion, are seen from a distant and cold perspective by the American press, not rarely with sarcastic and ironic touches, but in 2001 the Americans had their turn with the World Trade Center attack in September, an event ever present in Michelin's work.

The installation, not displaying the refined finishing-up that usually characterizes most works exhibited in museums and galleries, shows a poor environment, simply an untidy room in a house under restoration, with windows and curtains carelessly piled up and broken mirrors on the floor. There are also several ordinary daily life objects: an office chair, a walking stick, a black lamp on the ground, US post office bags and, curiously, a block of paper with the text *Brazil's IMF Sponsored Economic Disaster*, by Michel Chossudovsky, clearly downloaded from the internet. Two TV screens placed on the floor and another, smaller one, hung on the wall bring news and commentaries on the outside world

and the results of the economic crisis in Brazil, under the form of people moving from their homes because they are no longer able to keep their living standards. Actually, the installation simulates one of these houses. In short, here we have an unique installation, different from everything seen before, for it is a mixture of work of art and socioeconomic essay and political commentary.

If we are talking about estrangement and foreign things, the issue of translation comes up, as Canclini proposes. Translation is the possibility of foreigners to communicate. Interesting from this perspective is Simone Michelin's video *Lonesome* (2004), almost a video clip of Elvis Presley's song *Are You Lonesome Tonight?*, showing a Korean wedding couple photographing in the Winter Garden of the World Financial Center in New York, next to the ex-World Trade Center, not long before the disaster of September 2001. The song is obviously sung in English, and in order to be understood in Brazil, the artist translates it into Portuguese through subtitles. Curiously, in this case, the subtitles are structurally integrated to sound and images (the video is unconceivable without them), to the extent of producing an interesting counterpoint and introducing new relations of meaning derived from the translation.

One of the characteristics of the English language is that most words are neuter and, therefore, have no gender distinction. But when translated into a Latin language, it's necessary to specify the gender of the words and to do so it's necessary to observe the context in which these words are being used, especially to what or to whom they refer. *My dear*, for instance, could both be translated as *meu querido* or *minha querida*, depending on the gender of the addressed person. The same happens to *sweetheart* or *lonesome* and to most of the expressions of treatment. In Michelin's video, the Portuguese subtitles (they are in French in the international version of the work) correctly translate Elvis Presley's song, but in a totally unexpected way, assuming that the addressee is a man, and therefore using the masculine treatment for all English neuter words. So what once was a romantic and heterosexual song is automatically transformed into a vigorous

declaration of homosexuality. And thus, without altering the song's original meaning, Michelin reinterprets it from an entirely new perspective, just by employing subtitles that unexpectedly translated the original speech. Who but Michelin could extract from a romantic scene of a couple in honeymoon an unexpected discussion on sexual diversity and a forecast of September 11th?

The innovating work with translation and subtitles appears as well in the already mentioned *The White Room* and in the video *Museum Brotherhood* (2001, *Irmandade dos Museus*, in Portuguese), originally conceived to accompany a performance and that later gained a mono-channel independent version. In this video, a portion of an interview with Marcel Duchamp for the American TV in the occasion of a retrospective of his brother Jacques Villon in Boston's Museum of Fine Arts is fragmented, edited and added with huge subtitles over almost the whole field of the image. The edition is all cut, the sound volume goes up and down the whole time, and the noise is exaggerated by all means. Both questions and answers are ironized through repetitions and diagrams placed over the images. The work focus the institution of the museum and its – debatable – function of keeping and validating the work of art, at the same time that the very notion of art – aesthetics, taste – is also questioned.

Brazil presents a trajectory of over 50 years of history in the field of technological poetics, if we recall pioneers such as Abraham Palatinik, Jorge Antunes and Waldemar Cordeiro, but Simone Michelin's intervention in this history carries a *difference* of approach, motivated especially by the critical tendency of her works, the fruit of challenging a tragic social reality and a political life strangled by a military dictatorship and, later, by a ruinous political scenario. This is what turns her work so *distinctive* in relation to that which is being produced in both Brazil and abroad in the field of the intersection between art and technology. In a time of banalization of routines, the predominance of conformism and the integration with dominating values, it's reassuring to know that Michelin's work resumes a more radical perspective of art.

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