

The subtleties of Latin American good neighborliness

Archives reveal that the U.S. government had a hidden agenda in bringing Brazilian artists to New York

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In 1958, then-U.S. Vice President Nixon visited several Latin American countries, including Brazil. Greeted with boos and angry student demonstrations, he was surrounded by a large crowd, stoned, and nearly killed in Venezuela. It became obvious to the Eisenhower administration that the image of the U.S. in the region was extremely poor. Having to that point centered its attention on the battle against communism in Europe, the U.S. government turned its eyes southward, a focus that intensified after the Cuban revolution. Economic measures taken to reverse the Cuban situation are well known. However, the more subtle cultural initiatives taken during the Cold War have not been much studied in Brazil. “The arts were used as part of a strategy for building a positive image that the U.S. government would use to attract sympathizers. The São Paulo Biennial art exhibit (*Bienal de São Paulo*), for example, afforded a particularly useful opportunity as part of the execution of this ‘policy of attraction’ that, among other actions, sponsored research trips for artists and intellectuals,” says Dária Jaremtchuk, professor of art history at the Escola de Artes, Ciências e Humanidades (EACH) of the University of São Paulo (USP), and author of the research study entitled *Trânsitos e exílios: artistas brasileiros em Nova York durante a ditadura militar no*

Brasil (Relocation and exile: Brazilian artists in New York during the Brazilian military dictatorship).

Although the U.S. government did not concentrate on artists specifically, but on intellectuals in general, starting in the 1960s figures such as Amílcar de Castro (1966 and 1971), Rubens Gerchman (1967), Hélio Oiticica (1970), Antonio Henrique Amaral (1973), Ana Maria Maiolino (1971), and Antonio Dias (1972) spent time in New York City, funded by Guggenheim and Fulbright grants, as well as by other foundations and the Organization of American States (OAS). “That flow of visual artists and the involvement with political activities have never yet been much analyzed in depth. Those records are viewed as mere biographical data not associated with a larger phenomenon that was connected to shared historical factors,” Jaremtchuk says. “Neither the demonstrations against the military dictatorship nor the approximation of those Brazilians with the Latin American community that was already in New York were frequently mentioned in the bibliography,” she says.

At first, Jaremtchuk traveled to the United States only to map the experiences of those Brazilians, but her discoveries in archives there broadened the scope of her research. “Many documents give



Marcello Nitsche,
*Alliance for
Progress*, 1965

clear indications of the actions the U.S. government took in order to attract Brazilian artists and intellectuals. Until then, that flow of visitors had seemed merely to be the consequence of the repressive political situation at the time, which was said to have sent groups into ‘exile’ in New York,” she says. “But Washington acted without taking the military regime specifically into account. The U.S. was interested in welcoming those Brazilians regardless of the kind of government then in power. It was important to establish a favorable image in Latin America,” she adds. “Of course there are those famous imperialist ‘conspiracy theories,’ but in the case of the arts, everything was very subtle, part of the ideal cherished by sectors of the learned bourgeoisie in the United States that saw themselves as ‘civilizers’ who were collaborating with the government ‘for the advancement of’ Latin Americans.”

Even so, institutions now deny that they awarded study grants on the basis of factors other than merit. “It’s strange that while between 1920 and 1950, only six artists received such assistance, that number rose to 20 between 1950 and 1970. Furthermore, there are documents in U.S. government archives that prove that certain foundations participated in that policy,” Jaremtchuk reports. Contrary to what one might expect, the Brazilian dictatorship made an effort to facilitate artist travel. “This can be seen in the establishment of the Brazilian American Cultural Institute (BACI), an exchange organization connected with Itamaraty (as Brazil’s Ministry of External Relations is known) but idealized by American diplomats, a hypothesis reinforced by the presence of U.S. congressmen on its board of directors,” the researcher notes. Established in 1964 and closed in 2007, it was “left to die on the vine” in the mid-1970s, as the focus in Washington had changed to winning “hearts and minds” in Asia because of the Vietnam War.

If in the past it was Paris that was crucial to the modern experience, for contemporary artists that role would later be filled by New York, despite the generally anti-American ideological and political creeds held by those who applied for the grants. “The U.S. became a promising alternative for Brazilian artists who ‘went into exile’ voluntarily or otherwise during the 1960s and 1970s, despite the contradictions involved in the choice,” Jaremtchuk observes. The artists themselves, however, did not like to be labeled “exiles” because they could return to Brazil where they were recognized and able to make a living from their work. With rare exceptions (for example, Antonio Henrique Amaral), that was not the case in New York. “It was difficult for Latin American colleagues to understand why these Brazilians returned to life under the dictatorship. But they didn’t feel ‘co-opted’ by the U.S. government and saw themselves from a personal perspective, not as a collective group subject to politics.”

In the U.S., Brazilian artists experienced the difficulties of living in a new city with little money and a lack of professional recognition that often caused them to stop or suspend their work. To the U.S. public, Latin American art was supposed to be figurative, colorful, and exotic. There was no interest in “international” conceptual creations that did not bear a regional brand as the works of Mexican muralists and the paintings by Frida Kahlo had in the past. “Additionally, reflecting the attitude of the U.S. government, the public

didn't see Brazilian art as special but rather as part of a block labeled 'Latin American art,' Jaremtchuk explains. "It was, however, in that environment that the Brazilians experimented with a less nationalistic perspective, living in a milieu with a heterogeneous and cosmopolitan group, where experimentation and exploration of technological media such as video, photography, and photocopying were the order of the day."

Brazilians joined other Latin Americans in the battle against the dumbed-down and stereotypical view of exotic art. "Even today, however, conceptual artists from Brazil who have had success in the United States are rare," Jaremtchuk notes. Darcy Ribeiro was exactly right when he said Brazil discovered Latin America only while in exile. Antonio Henrique Amaral, for example, was more successful than his colleagues because, among other factors, he used bananas as a recurring theme in his paintings. This reminded Americans of the Brazil of Roosevelt's "good neighbor" days during World War II, with a definite trace of criticism toward the dictatorship. During relocation, Brazilians came to realize that they had peers; they shared feelings with Hispanic America, something they had previously disparaged. "It was not an identity, but a sharing that was formed," the professor observes.

Maureen Bisiliat,
Untitled, 1968



Time spent in the U.S. also sparked new discussions about the nature of art and led to the use of different materials and media. "Amilcar de Castro, for example, couldn't obtain the raw material needed for his sculptures and started to employ other techniques. Gerchman also rethought his art, based on what he saw in the United States," Jaremtchuk recalls. Coming from a country where the market for arts was feeble, with only a few galleries and expositions, artists found that the time spent in New York, as one of them put it, made them feel like "children at an amusement park." Jaremtchuk explains: "Exposed to a lively cosmopolitan market reality, Brazilians began to understand how the modern world of art functioned and passed that knowledge on to the generation that followed them, leaving marks that are still visible today."

For financial reasons, artists lived in the "less elegant" part of the city, between Tribeca and the West Village, where their apartments became studios and meeting places. "Those casual gatherings helped define the Latin American artists as a community by creating social cells in New York that enabled them to manage their daily lives and still preserve their differences from the Anglo-Saxon universe in which they were living. Since many artists who were not Latin American frequented those spaces, there was always a chance to gain visibility in more traditional circles," explains Jacqueline Barnitz, a historian affiliated with the University of Texas and author of the study entitled *Twentieth-century Art of Latin America* (2000). In general, however, the artists who were "in transit" opted to construct a milieu of expositions and galleries that was parallel to the official market.

"There was only one exhibition space in New York that was open to Latin America, because of business interests explicit to the Americas: this was the Center for Inter-American Relations (CIAR), on elegant Park Avenue. Its headquarters was financed by the Rockefeller group. During the harsher years of the military regime, however, being present in that space was viewed by us with great reservations. Young people who exhibit there today have no idea of the 'climate' the surrounded that facility in the early 1970s," explains Aracy Amaral, art critic and retired professor of art history at the School of Architecture and Urban Planning at the University of São Paulo (FAU-USP). Amaral does not believe, however, that there was a relationship between study grants and U.S. government policy. "The Guggenheim grants were coveted, they were considered as a kind of award for artists, researchers, and scientists, since merit, rather than political criteria was used in awarding them. A candi-

Antonio
Henrique Amaral,
Brasiliana 9,
1969



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date could be from the Left or any other political faction and still obtain the grant, provided that the project and the candidate’s résumé were approved by the very demanding board,” she says.

According to Amaral, even during the 1960s Paris was the preferred destination for Brazilians. There, regardless of their personal tendencies, they took part in group shows with other Latin Americans. “We felt like brothers and sisters, especially because of the dictatorial regimes that dominated Southern Cone countries,” she recalls. “The interest on the part of the United States emerged as a new phenomenon in 1969, when Kynaston McShine, of the Museum of Modern Art (MoMA) in New York, visited Brazil and invited Cildo Meirelles, Hélio Oiticica, Guilherme Vaz, and Artur Barrio to take part in the 1970 show entitled *Information*, which was considered to have been the first group show of conceptual art in a U.S. museum.”

The visit by McShine occurred in the same year as the boycott of the Tenth São Paulo Biennial, organized by artists after a series of incidents of censorship in Brazilian artistic circles. The call to refrain from participating was so widely heeded that the United States was prevented from participating, thus provoking awkward political and diplomatic moments. After all, the São Paulo Biennial, along with the Venice Biennale, was considered by U.S. politicians an important “political show window” in the scenario of the Cold War. Until 1961, MoMA was responsible for American presentations at those events, but starting in 1962, the United States Information Agency (USIA) took over the exhibits. Therefore, the Biennial boycott worried the U.S. diplomats. “We need to give more importance to American participation in the next Biennial. Our inability to mount a major art presentation in 1969 is still a topic of frequent conversation and a source of embarrassment,” wrote an officer in the American Embassy’s Country Public Affairs Office in a memorandum found by Jaremtchuk.

More than 80% of the invited artists stayed away from the São Paulo Biennial—including Carlos Vergara, Gerchman, Burle Marx, Sérgio Camargo, and Oiticica. Exhibitors such as the U.S., Mexico, the Netherlands, Sweden, Argentina, and France joined the protest. Ciccillo Matarazzo,

president of the Biennial, went to Brasília to ask the military government to get involved to prevent a fiasco at the next edition, in addition to asking for financial assistance. The request was well received because the regime was worried about the “defamation of the image of this country” abroad as a result of the denunciations of torture made by exiles. The rest of the world needed to see a different profile of Brazil. Exhibits by Brazilian artists were organized in several countries to show that there was “freedom of expression” in the artistic world. After 1970, Itamaraty began organizing exhibitions routinely, as well as collecting background information on artists, both those in Brazil and artists elsewhere. “They even drew up a ‘blacklist’ of who could and could not receive government assistance, as Ambassador Rubens Ricupero told me. He headed the Cultural Diffusion Division of Itamaraty between 1971 and 1974,” Jaremtchuk says. “In fact, he worked closely with the Office of the Special Advisor on Public Relations (AERP), since the government wanted to soften the impact of the reports from exiles.”

Brazilian diplomats were then invited to assist in the effort to bring back for the 1971 Biennial the

Antonio Dias, *Fumaça do prisioneiro* (Smoke from a prisoner), 1964



countries that had been absent from the 1969 event. “The presence of the United States was vital, and its absence could not be interpreted as political disagreement as could, for example, the case of the Netherlands, which had declared its opposition to the dictatorship,” Jaremtchuk notes. Through the efforts of the BACI and Itamaraty’s own staff, the Brazilian ministry was transformed into an important agent that would determine which exhibitions would be taken to other countries. The increase in investment by Itamaraty shortly after the boycott of the Biennial, Jaremtchuk states, is also symptomatic, almost resembling the U.S. “policy of attraction.” Despite these efforts, American artists once again refrained from participating in the 1971 Biennial. Brazilian newspapers questioned the U.S. statement that its absence was due to a “lack of funds” from Washington.

“The international boycott represented more than the cancellation of an exhibition. It was a well-aimed blow to the influence of the Biennial as catalyst for the more recent developments in the visual arts of Latin America,” observes historian Claudia Carliman, of New York’s John Jay College and author of *Brazilian Art Under dictatorship* (Duke University Press, 2012). Carliman recalls that the boycott did not end until 1979, when the Brazilian government gave amnesty to political prisoners. “And so, visual artists, who were not seen as a threat by the regime and did not suffer the tight control exercised over the theatre, music, or literature, helped denounce the abuses of the dictatorship from abroad. In addition, they were willing to reconfigure the role of the public, question the art market, and challenge the power and legitimacy of artistic institutions,” Carliman observes.

Oddly, this debate arose as an unexpected result of the American “policy of attraction.” “The growing interest by the so-called hegemonic centers for art produced in culturally distant countries also favored the deepening of the conceptual debate on the ‘margins’ by provoking a tense and conflicting relationship with the ‘external’ reading,” says Maria Morethy Couto, professor of art history at the State University of Campinas (Unicamp), who is researching the topic for her forthcoming book *O trauma do moderno: arte e crítica de arte na América do Sul* (The trauma of the modern: art and art criticism in South America (1950-1970)). According to Jaremtchuk, this consolidates the idea of “relocation” rather than exile: “Brazilian art from that period, in some way, happened in that passage between Brazil and the United States. The boycotted Biennial would lead to the *Contrabiennial* (Counter-Biennial), a publication that was transformed into a political manifesto produced by groups of Latin American artists in New York,



Carlos Zilio, *Para um jovem de brilhante futuro*
(To a young man with a brilliant future), 1973-74

Rubens Gerchman,
É proibido dobrar à esquerda
(No left turn), 1965



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one of the cases in which the community worked together in carrying out projects.”

Jamemtchuk points out, “A fruit of the same context was to be the *Museo Latinoamericano* (Latin American Museum), the artists’ answer to the conservative policies adopted by the Center for Inter-American Relations, on whose board were figures such as Dean Rusk and Lincoln Gordon, both linked to military coups in several Southern Cone countries. The idea was to establish a museum composed of separate ateliers. Visitors would be given a map with the addresses and thus be able to acquaint themselves directly with art production without going through traditional procedures.” It was from New York, through the *Museo Latinoamericano*, that the proposal came to expand the 1969 boycott and to further spur denunciations of the practice of torture under dictatorships. Gerchman, for example, participated in the museum movement while at the same time distancing himself from the drawings and paintings associated with the urban and Rio de Janeiro images that tied him to the *Nova Figuração* (New Figuration) movement. His abandoning of paintbrushes to take up the use of words in that period, however, can be credited not to the American conceptual environment but to the repercussions of

issues raised in Rio. “However, the visual-poetic-fine arts proposals would become problematic in a different way in the New York atmosphere,” Jaremtchuk observes. This makes sense given the relocation of the artists.

However, the United States’ interest gradually waned, and with it the chance for integrating Brazilians into the United States. “Institutions like MoMA that possessed Latin American works didn’t bother to mount permanent exhibits of those pieces,” Jaremtchuk explains. “The absence of representations of Latin American artists in U.S. museums made galleries reluctant to promote them. The public, in turn, was not interested in works by foreigners who were not given space in the more respected institutions, because that seemed to indicate that they were not worthy of attention.” In Brazil, BACI increasingly suffered from the lack of funds until 2007, when it was deactivated after the Lula administration declared that the United States was no longer a priority in its foreign policy.

“Similarly, while Latin America was ceasing to be a focus within U.S. government policy, with fewer official activities devoted to the arts, in recent decades the task of approximation came to be performed by the art market,” Jaremtchuk observes. The promotional work is now done by galleries and fairs, and only in that way are museums starting to take more interest in the diversity of art produced by Latin American countries. ■

Project

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