

HIV+ in São Paulo—an artist's take on *Sexualities*

Several friends wrote me reminder about or to ask my opinion of the *Histórias da sexualidade* exhibit (20.10.2017-14.2.2018) at the São Paulo Museum of Art (MASP).

I moved to São Paulo to work on Lanchonete.org, a five-year project focused on the Right to the City, which just ended. I contracted HIV while living in São Paulo. It is from this perspective that I participated in an expansive, year+ period of discussion called *Cidade Queer* collectively 'held by' EXPLODE!, Casarão do Belvedere, Aurora Editions, Publication Studio São Paulo, Lanchonete.org and others locally in São Paulo, and also the perspective with which I viewed the *Histórias da sexualidade* exhibit. A long-term community organizing process is very different than an exhibition visit, of course. Art making and curating, less so I would argue. However in the ideas that follow, I am not attempting to focus on, or over determine, any one of those experiences, but to retain a blur in middle in order to, make out something bigger.

While I count Lanchonete.org—or the pulling together of many different things into synthesis for a predetermined period of time that it examples—my art work, having the awareness of EXPLODE!, Cursinho Popular Transformação, São Paulo Network of Heritage Education/REPEP, Casarão do Belvedere, and Coletivo Amem was basic curatorial research for its year-long process. The research also included knowledge of other movements and projects that were not curated into any specific event of *Cidade Queer*, such as A Revolta da Lâmpada and BaixoCentro. It is not always the case that social movements and art institutions interact; sometimes they don't need to. One might argue that the general corruption of Brasil's political economy resulting in the 2016 coup d'état, devaluation of the Brasilien Real, and tandem rise of the evangelical bloc begged urgent, new community strategies, organizational forms and cultural fronts. And, that EXPLODE!, Coletivo Amem, Lanchonete.org, Cursinho Popular Transformação, A Revolta da Lâmpada, and many others are reacting along racial solidarity, body-political, aesthetic and public health terms to the situation at hand.

[News out of Davos](#) was that São Paulo mayor, Doria may be the country's next president. A graffiti tag on the outside wall of Casa Dona Yaya—a cultural venue in the city center—says 'São Paulo não é um empresa!' (São Paulo is not a company), just down the street from the Teatro Oficina and Viaduto Jaceguai where fences are being installed to prevent people from sleeping under the bridge ... the Oficina corner is perhaps the most symbolic parcel of real estate in 'verticalization of Bexiga' debate with Tropicália-era theatre maker, Ze Celso holding off the construction of a shopping mall for decades. And the concern over Bexiga—São Paulo's central, working class, Afro-Italiano neighborhood—is perhaps common to inner-city, gentrification debates throughout Brasil's urban areas and across South America. A couple weeks ago in Europe, the international news reported some protests when the extension of Lula's prison term was announced, but the notion that Brazil had a *coup d'état* last year still seemed provocative in conversational

situations. Comparing the Dilma ‘impeachment’ to the Martha Stewart ‘imprisonment’ seemed to work the best. Lula has one more appeal. Dilma by his side in Porto Alegre for the bad news. He can still run for president. To sense a tremor of the 2013 Vinegar Revolts yet brewing is more than merely suggestive, it would seem.

I refer to the ‘period’ of *Cidade Queer* to be clear that it was constructed as one-year for the purposes of art discourse and frameworks (e.g. closing planned for time of the 2016 São Paulo biennial with [book](#) and [film](#) release shortly thereafter), even while the constituent parts, leaders of and within it are autonomous and their work continues. One such group is Coletivo Amem, which started as a weekly dance party in April 2016 with the explicit goal to discuss issues such as race, class, gender, sexuality, health, and specifically HIV. Using the party as platform, Coletivo Amem is equal parts artistic and political, giving visibility to public health issues and disparities among black and peripheral populations.

Getting far away and digesting the international media—e.g. The Guardian’s [‘This exhibition contains nudity’: the front line of Brazil’s culture wars](#)—and getting close-up through involvement with work like *Cidade Queer*, a year-long, site-specific process focused on public health, sexualities and politicized bodies, both in São Paulo’s center and its periphery. Maybe that is how to get the best focus.

I was recently interviewed by Brazilian Elle (February 2018) about the *Cidade Queer* project, and I asked the journalist to include that I contracted HIV while living in São Paulo. It was not included. I specifically asked them to say that I contracted HIV while living in Sao Paulo. It seemed like an honest way to speak about art, especially given that the article’s theme is the 1980s Ballroom dance style, Vogueing, in which a fashion model’s movements are imitated or re-interpreted for a new form. While not exhaustively about HIV, explicitly about HIV. It seemed like something worth hearing in light of what I think the *Cidade Queer* project was looking at. While not only about HIV, the cultural movement has explicitly engaged HIV and related public health themes. The Elle article mentioned the film and book by-products of *Cidade Queer* as the work, and therefore didn’t capture the year-long process in terms of its desire to understand multiple public health, identity and social justice struggles between São Paulo, NYC and other cities.

Some years back, before Lanchonete.org took off, I was walking with some São Paulo gays. We passed someone on the sidewalk and I heard one of the guys utter ‘pão com ovo’ (bread with egg). I asked what it meant. At first I assumed it was sexual innuendo of sorts, but, no, it means boring or *passé*. While the dichotomy of country gay and city gay simplifies the comparison. I remember the one time I made the mistake of buying a women’s blouse and wearing it to junior high school in rural Tennessee ... the self-consciousness that went along with that ‘moment’. The ‘friend’ from church behind me in the school hallway laughing with someone else about the way I walked. Swishy, I suppose. Was I wearing that blouse? No, not necessarily ... the moment was long enough to include a rumor that I sucked dick passed along by

a ‘friend’ on the football team, putting it to words to make sure I would deny it. While I don’t know exactly what it means when a São Paulo gay calls a gay from the ‘interior’—or from far away—a ‘bread with egg’—I do think I get the gist of it from other life experiences.

While I don’t want to equate city gays or São Paulo gays with white gays. Nor do I wish to suggest that we gays with multiple experiences—outside and inside—have more or less power of observation than an ‘other’. I’m a white gay, so I’ll start there.

White.

Gay.

Men.

We get to do a lot in the world, including dictating tastes. I went to the *Histórias da sexualidade* exhibit at MASP twice during its run. Once before World AIDS Day and once after. The *Histórias da sexualidade* exhibition’s themed sections were:

Naked Bodies

Totemisms

Languages

Gender Performativities

Sexual Games

Sexual Markets

Religiosities

Voyeurisms

I am not saying that HIV/AIDS was not mentioned in the exhibit at all. Vague strokes.

The MASP *Histórias da sexualidade* exhibit did not include the film or book *Cidade Queer*, and perhaps that is why I waited until its end to offer my review. Out of pride. While it would have been nice to see [Cidade queer, uma leitora](#) (a partnership with Edições Aurora and Publication studio São Paulo) on the book table of ‘Sexualities’, I was more desirous of pressing issues, such as ‘Public Health’ or ‘Culture Wars’ hidden among the abstract section titles and art on the walls.

The Schwules Museum in Berlin named an [eponymous show](#) after the project and a [documentary film](#) by Danila Bustamante that followed the last three weeks of the *Cidade Queer* process and the [EXPLODE! Residency](#), dividing the film into a triptych to better display the various themes, ideas and voices the process entailed. Participants common to EXPLODE! Residency (and broader *Cidade Queer* as well as Lanchonete.org) and the [Capacete Residency in Athens](#) on the occasion of Documenta 14—Michelle Mattiuzzi, Gian Spina, Jota Mombaça, Mavi Veloso and others—hosted an [event in Athens](#) by the same name. In Milan with the help of ViaFarini, I screened the film at the KO Club, a bar and darkroom frequented by late-

nite-people and Romanian rent boys. Our host Mercedes performed a drag show and we danced to Romanian music altogether thereafter.

Aretha Sadick told me once that she feels the city moving and her body moving with it [I paraphrase]. EXPLODE! led a [Rainbow Riot walk](#) with Umlilo and Stash Crew (South Africa) that passed by a public cemetery where the gravestone of a trans woman had finally been changed to reflect her chosen name, rather than the male birth name. No Lugar and the Contemporary Art Museum of Quito (Ecuador) invited performance and publication workshops under the rubric, *Ciudad Queer* during Quito's 2017 Pride parade and festivities. Coletivo Amem and EXPLODE! traveled to NYC for Black Pride and the #HouseLivesMatter Conference in August 2017. Aretha, EXPLODE!, and others helped make sense of the poetic ideas of De Certeau and the power of 'Walking in the City', moving through São Paulo, as well as NYC and Quito. Again, something is already stirring in these places and art practices and processes can be attuned without being partisan.

I don't want it to seem however that I'm criticizing the *Histórias da sexualidade* exhibit for not knowing about something esoteric or exclusionary. Nor am I taking the artist stance of bragging about who did know about it, always far away. I am speaking of awareness of something that is going on pervasively in the space around us: a 'culture war' with immense public health implications.

Let's imagine for a moment that the close-up equates to something more grounded or of the grassroots. It involves profound knowledge of a community or demographic. Let's imagine this tracks with Claire Bishop's notion of the 'social turn' and with the simulacrum of 'goodness' called 'social practice'. Sofía Hernández Chong Cuy begs us off a self-righteous position, stating that:

Social practice has not been, is not, nor will be capable of achieving a better society because, just like corporate social responsibility, it is designed as a symbolic delirium of distraction from the inherent immorality of globalization. It is designed precisely like a "deus ex machina" of culture in order to avoid a historical turn anywhere but in a dramatic theatrical staging. Social practice, to the extent that it is attributed the dictatorial right of moral validation and at the same time does not achieve it in practice, is most certainly an ethical paradox, the "missing link" of culture under capitalism¹.

Let's imagine that 'far away' is either a physical distance or the distance art—and curating within it—sometimes demands from the social condition. Again, it is not always the case that social movements and art institutions interact; sometimes they don't need to. However, some themes would seem to insist on it. The MASP show was only far away. By being far away, it is hard to care for nuance. Pitch, tonality, cadence, lilt, reverberation, decibelage, and porousness cannot be calibrated from

¹ <http://www.coleccioncisneros.org/editorial/in-their-words/social-art-practice-and-corporate-social-ideology>

such a distance. I allude to a coming into ‘focus’ throughout the article. By putting on the *Histórias da sexualidade* during Brasil’s culture war, it would appear that the Museum wanted to be ‘close-up’, but kept its distance through a general survey of its holdings, 18-and-over age limit, a Gorilla Girls side-show, and basically an un-identifiable position. Focus could have been achieved by leaning in.

‘Fora Doria’ has been added to ‘Fora Temer’. A chant heard at blocos in São Paulo’s Center during Carnival a couple weeks back. One of the first actions of the Doria administration was to disband Crackolandia. To sense a tremor of the failed Novo Luz project reconfiguring is more than merely suggestive, it would seem. Next Doria used the *Cidade Linda* program to banish Pichação, a class-specific, street art language.

Ballroom and Vogueing comes from NYC and other US cities’ police violence, AIDS and public health struggles that hit communities of color the hardest. One might argue that the dance style communicates class, race and age specific information—or serves as language—from the intersection of fashion and choreography comparable to how Pichação is prominent in space and territory struggles and emanates from within the housing movement and similar struggles at the hands of street artists and graffiti writers.

Águas de Março have begun, and the business and cultural year begins in Brazil with Carnival in the rearview mirror. There is a new show at MASP. The court has decided that trans people no longer have to seek counseling before planning their medical transitions.

Congratulations [Linn da Quebrada](#) on your documentary ‘Teddy’ at Berlinale for [Bixa Travesty](#). Thanks to you and *Jup do Bairro* for performing on that small stage in front of Casarão do Belvedere for the *QueerDrilla* during the traditional *Festa Junina* celebration back in 2016.

And the queer city morphs into something new. Close up and far away.

—Todd Lanier Lester (sometime right after the Sexualities show closed)