



# Shedding Light on the Light District: Artistic Processes in and around the Teatro de Contêiner

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This article presents interviews with artists from Cia Mungunzá de Teatro and their partners about the artistic work carried out in Bairro da Luz in the center of the city of São Paulo / Brazil. In 2016, Cia Mungunzá was responsible for creating the Teatro de Contêiner (Theater of Container), a cultural space established in one of the most impoverished areas of Brazil, where the level of poverty leads many to use crack cocaine and alcohol. The Teatro de Container was installed as a result of an occupation of public land by Cia Mungunzá de Teatro unknown to and unsupported by the state. Since then, the cultural space has been home to social and artistic activities. The possibilities for action by artists in the region were placed alongside my (Vinicius Torres Machado's) own experience in order to highlight the difficulties of the work and the achievements of the interviewees. Respondents Lucas and Verônica are co-founders of the Cia Mungunzá and are co-responsible for

the occupation of the area. Dona Carmen is a former social worker who leads a project in the neighborhood that has moved into the Theater of Container, teaching impoverished women how to sew. Finally Dentinho is a social worker and artist in the area. The article seeks to bring the voice of these artists to reflect on the presence of artistic works in places of extreme poverty.

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In 2017 I was part of an artistic community in São Paulo/Brazil searching for a venue to perform a new project which we had been working on for the past few months. It was supposed to be a long form performance projected to involve audience participation on a large scale, starting with a choreography inspired by Brazilian popular dances, and culminating in a dinner at which scenes would be performed. Our initial idea was to develop the piece in a park or any other open area where contact with nature would bring up new possibilities of being together, and enhance our relationship with reality and life. Back then, the Brazilian population was deeply engaged in using their right to demonstrate across the country, since during this period, some astonishing events had been moving parts of our society: a coup masked as a legitimate impeachment that forced the leftist president Dilma Rousseff out of government; and the impact of 2013's enormous demonstrations, which had started as a leftist protest against the increasing of public transport fares, but were suddenly misappropriated by right wing political groups, galvanising the rise of the current Brazilian far right movement that would culminate in Bolsonaro's presidential election. The city became a disputed area, and a large group of artists were moving their projects outside of their workspaces, creating performances in open areas of the city. What was also important for our artistic group at the time was our understanding of some of Jacques Rancière's ideas from his book *Politics of Aesthetics* (2004), especially those which gave us a deeper comprehension of what the sharing of a performative act in a co-creative process between the audience

and performers could be. The aim of our performance was to create an open space where interaction could take place, tackling the lack of contact among individuals in our society, and maybe bringing forth a more inclusive relationship with our peers.

These ideas and the changes taking place in our society made us aware of the recent project developed by Munguza Theater Company, who had occupied an abandoned public space and built up a theater from scratch in the center of São Paulo.<sup>1</sup> The theater was named *Teatro de Contêiner* (Theater of Containers) and soon became one of the most fascinating artistic projects in São Paulo in recent memory. This theater, made out of containers, set in a deeply stigmatised area of the city (due to its extreme poverty and the gathering of crack cocaine and alcohol addicts) is also impressive because of its beautiful garden. There, we immediately thought that our performance would fit in smoothly but, in our naivety, we did not realize that performing in that area of the city would bring up many ethical issues, starting with the value of beauty itself inside the most impoverished area of São Paulo, pejoratively known as *Cracolândia* because of the large number of crack cocaine addicts living on the streets in the area.

The Luz District (Bairro da Luz) in the center of São Paulo, where the theater is located, is an area of much dispute, especially after construction conglomerates bought a large part of the neighborhood for a low price and, since then, have been trying to get rid of the impoverished and the homeless living on the streets. Therefore, beauty is an aesthetic value implicitly used against the people living there by the city's administration acting on behalf of the construction companies. Under the name "Cidade Limpa" (clean city) and other revitalization campaigns, the local government goes directly against the life of the impoverished, considering this demographic as 'things' referred to as *noias* ("schizos"/paranoid drug addicts), zombies, etc, due to their cocaine addiction.

In one of the most appalling moments of these so-called revitalization campaigns, the destruction of the *cortiços* (derelict cohabitation spaces in the center of São Paulo that act as refuges for the poor) in the Luz neighborhood gave rise to a strong reaction from our society, especially when a bulldozer destroyed some houses with people still inside. One day when we were visiting the area to understand what

exactly was happening, a large group of crack cocaine addicts fought back against the police who were cruelly evicting them from their places of residence and taking their tents away from them so that they could no longer shelter on the streets, and would be forced to move. Although we were working there for some months, the reality was that we were also intruders, and thus, we were attacked with sticks and stones in the same way that the police were being attacked.

At that time we were in the process of changing our initial project in order to adapt it to the new reality we were facing. The first step was to momentarily give up on the original idea of creating a performance and to work according to the needs of the community. In this period we were approaching the Festa Junina (June Festivals) season, a series of Christian parties important for Brazilians during the Winter. Therefore we decided to make the production of this event our artistic project for the next month. The festival took place inside of Ocupação Mauá, a previously abandoned building near the Teatro de Contêiner that was occupied by the *Movimento dos Sem Tetos* (Homeless Workers' Movement). This movement had occupied some other buildings across São Paulo (and continues to do so to this day), in an action referred to as *Dia de Festa* (Party Day), since it was the day when they finally got a place to live.<sup>2</sup> The Festa Junina, organised for and with the people of the Ocupação Mauá community, was an important celebration for us, and gave us an immense feeling of fulfilment. The fact is that the social gap between us and the people living in Ocupação Mauá was not as wide as the one we would later experience with the homeless outside the building.

Failing to see this, and eager to perform, we decided to return to our initial project of creating a performance; not in the garden, as we had previously thought, but on the streets near the theater. Our intention was not to hide ourselves within the theater and avoid contact with the impoverished community living on the streets. However, back then we could not see that, due to our differences, promoting togetherness without working on our differences would make the performance almost impossible.

The Brazilian theorist Ricardo Fabbrini explains how the creation of a relational performance might give rise to a false impression of reality, because in most the cases, the necessity of building up such an event together hides the fact that society is based on conflicts

of opposing forces (2010). In the case of Brazilian society, with its huge socio-economic gap, this idea seems to be more true than ever. Nevertheless, in our case, the difference among us was so great that it would inevitably overshadow any other subject brought forth by the performance. Alongside people whose livelihood depended on scavenging rubbish from the streets, we were always representing what we were: white people, from a middle class background bringing all the signs of the long history of oppression and exploitation that continues to affect the black community in São Paulo, who form the majority in that area. Most of our actions looked as though we were either making amends or, when ignoring the social difference, extremely out of touch with reality. The possibility of conceiving a performance not based on representation became impossible, because in a society with such a huge social gap, when one is performing, one necessarily represents one's own societal and historical background. It was at this time in 2017 that ideas about inclusivity and self-representation were starting to develop in the São Paulo artistic movement, which brought with it the voice and issues of social minorities (a key focus of the art being produced there right now) to the forefront of Brazilian life.

After our performance, which took place at night, bordering a block with transgender prostitution, rag and bone men, and crack cocaine addicts, the group collapsed. We decided to not perform again and now looking back I think that performing there, especially with a play with no direct political content, showed that we were just a group of people who could afford to do something like that, while the people over there were struggling to find something to eat. Looking back, I don't think that we could handle this, and we didn't have the tools to work in a different way. It seems that the urge to perform and carry out our aesthetic research overshadowed the possibility of creating a work of art deeply entrenched in radical care, where the support is no longer the performer or anything that is watched, but the relationship that is created. This is what we were trying to do when organising events for the community living there. As Harry Josephine Giles points out:

So, in a political situation in which care is both exceptionally necessary and exceptionally underprovided, acts of care begin to look politically radical. To care is to act against the grain of social and economic orthodoxy: to advocate care

is, in the present moment, to advocate a kind of political rupture. But by its nature, care must be a rupture which involves taking account of, centering, and, most importantly, taking responsibility for those for whom you are caring. Is providing care thus a valuable avenue of artistic exploration? Is the art of care a form of radical political art? Is care, in a society which devalues care, itself shocking? (Giles)

Interested in understanding how some artists were working with this idea of radical care in a practical, yet unknowing way, the extracts of the three interviews that follow are an attempt to shed some light on the work being carried out in the Luz neighborhood. All the interviews are connected to the Theater of Containers, since it has started to be a center for social and artistic endeavours in the area. The actors and directors Lucas and Verônica are co-founders of the Mungunzá Company and are co-responsible for the occupation of the area. My interest in talking to them came up not only because of their brave venture into building up a theater from nothing, but also to shed light upon how a theater group dealt with the stark contrasts within the region and how their aesthetic approach was influenced by that context. The two other interviews go more in the other direction. Using the social care programmes within the community as a starting point, I would like to understand how Dona Carmen might consider her projects there from an artistic perspective. Dona Carmen is a former social worker who created and leads a project in the neighborhood that has moved into the Theater of Container, teaching impoverished women how to sew. Finally, Dentinho is a social worker and artist in the area who presented his first exhibition in the Theater of Containers and, due to his past experience with crack addiction, can give us a perspective on what art really represents to those living on the streets.

It is worth mentioning that some liberty has been taken when translating the interviews, especially those of Dona Carmen and Dentinho, as I tried as much as possible to maintain the patterns of speech that represent their street vocabulary. The challenge here was safeguarding the translation from doing away with their specific approach to language, as the use of short sentences for example seems to reveal a certain relation to time and urgency of people in the area who are struggling to survive without any resources.

**VINICIUS TORRES MACHADO:** Verônica, Lucas, thank you for agreeing to talk to us. First of all I want to express my admiration for your project; The Teatro de Contêiner (Container Theater) has been one of the most successful cultural projects developed in São Paulo over the last few decades. The way that it was conceived and built without any support of the authorities and even against their will is remarkable. So, could you please explain the construction of the Teatro de Contêiner (Container Theater) in that particular area?

**LUCAS BREDÁ:** We are a group from São Paulo that in 2014 won our first call for funding and managed to rent a space for the creation of a new performance. So, we realized that part of this public resource that was delivered by the Secretary of Culture was, due to the nature of the real estate market, being drained for the lease of a space. We then tried to partner with the city hall to build a theater.

We tried to develop this project through political conversations. This was very much denied, *a priori*. Then we thought about taking over a publicly owned space. Unlike many illegal occupations in downtown São Paulo, where you just use the property as is, we wanted to build a really theatrical space. In fact, it's a hybrid space, right? A wide open space both in its architecture and also in its Socio-artistic conception, set against the backdrop of Cracolândia.

And then we decided to build it out of containers, because it was a fast, clean, sustainable construction. As a strategy, we started telling local authorities that we would go on the land and stay there for two months, justifying it as an artistic action that would take place there, and that it would host the first festival of performance and architecture in the city of São Paulo, called *Arquiteturando a Cidade*. So we came up with this excuse and asked to stay there for 2 months, and in the penultimate week, the event would take place.

**VTM:** So, as you didn't have any support from the authorities to create an artistic space, you decided to make up your own event, knowing that they could approve it more easily, so that you would have time to prepare the space for the placing of the containers?

**LB:** We said that we would leave after making some improvements; like fixing the fences and so on. But the containers needed 3 months



to be built in the city of São Vicente near São Paulo. So, before even knowing whether or not we would have the land, with the permission from the sub-prefecture for the event (since we would receive the result of the application one month before it started), we had already started building the containers, because we would have to arrive with them practically ready, with doors and everything to be assembled very quickly right under the authorities' noses.

**VTM:** For me the act of leaving the theater itself as a long lasting legacy of the performance is a clever strategy when working in countries where you have so little support from the authorities for cultural enterprises. How did you prepare for this?

**VERÔNICA LO TURCO GENTILIN:** Since there were 10 containers ... there had to be some way to assemble it quickly, right? So a run-through using cranes was necessary in the city where the containers were being produced, because we needed to know how to do it quickly. We literally set it up in downtown São Paulo, at dawn, as if we were putting together a big Lego set. The assembly took place in the early hours of Sunday morning, and the process took around 4 hours.

**VTM:** And what did you do the weeks before the containers got there?

**LB:** Besides the practical goal of preparing the concrete area where the containers would be set, we also articulated a *rapprochement* with the surrounding community: shopkeepers, the residents, the homeless, and the police. So, during this period, we would go there and talk to everyone, and when we finished we would all go and eat-in somewhere nearby, just to do something together with the community at the end of the day. So even before the construction of the theater, the social groups working in the territory already knew about our idea, and they were aware that we were going to build it. Dona Carmen knew, for example, as did other social workers that were working in the area. So when we settled there, these people started coming over, these people started to use it as a [communal] space, because before there was no physical space where they could meet, and that was socially and artistically important for us. And then these groups started to enter and become a part of that space.

**VTM:** I will interview two representatives of these groups that have expanded on the opportunities they could take up due to having the Teatro de Contêiner as a safe space. But as they were already working in the region, I think that their experience was different from when you first came to the district. Although Mungunzá Cia has a long tradition of working with political theater and impoverished communities, I would like to know what your initial reaction was to what is one of the most impoverished areas in Brazil?

**VLTG:** In the beginning we dreamt about this space; we could've never imagined that it would be dismantled within the first month for not being functional, as we had idealized it so much. Like, you go there, you put on a cute little thing, an aromatiser, for example, and the next minute, it's not there anymore. Those in need take it away; you clean everything nicely, and then the homeless go to use the bathroom ... And how do they leave the bathroom? It's different to how one of us leaves a bathroom. So you also start to change yourself: I want to go with this simple outfit, but this outfit is too much for that area, so okay, I'm going to wear this ragged blouse. Do you understand? Then who takes care of your image, and in a broader sense, the aesthetic aspects of what is produced there is not you anymore, it's the territory. And that's when the territory not only starts taking over your visible aesthetics, but also the concepts you want to work on in your performances. Because, suddenly, the subjects you want to include, the guidelines you wanted to bring, begin to be characterized by your surroundings.

**VTM:** I think that it is one of the key points we need in order to understand some issues related to the project we developed there. The space is already full of content and demands that need to be brought forth.

**VLTG:** I think the encounter between a prior aesthetic project that we already had with a space like that is not just a physical one, but also thematic, you know, a conceptual aesthetic. So, yes, there was a change in our initial dreams for the space, and we ended up creating projects that we could've never imagined. For example, we didn't go there saying "we want to put on an art exhibition created by crack users" - it was imposed on us by the reality of the neighborhood. When we arrived, there was something a bit 'missionary' about it,

right? Deep down inside, I think the artist thinks, “let’s go there, let’s bring our shows, let’s put on a show that the homeless can also enjoy.” We had this thing of bringing culture to the community by performing. But what we didn’t realize, was that there, culture is also a football field that we made for children; that there, culture is also related to the fact that a person can use a bathroom, because culture is how you cultivate a space. In the beginning we felt that we had failed every time we put on a show and the street population didn’t turn up. And then we thought “why do they need to watch a show here, if they are making use of the space in other ways,” right?

**VTM:** In our experience there, we struggled with more or less the same thing, because when we got there we were so unsettled by seeing the differences between our backgrounds and their possibilities in life, that we tried to get rid of our differences by creating a false communal space. Nowadays, I think that while we were trying to do that, our behaviour might have been even more oppressive, because we reinforced our dominant position, as the ones who could choose which direction to move in when we can’t stand a situation, instead of staying with the problem.

**VLTG:** I always wanted a lot... we wanted these people to be mixed, that our public, our audience was full of users, homeless people, artists, intellectuals, and researchers and that it would be hybrid in that sense. But it’s obvious that once a queue of people forms for the show, most of them artists and researchers, the people that live on the street will line up, not to watch the show, but rather to ask for money. I remember a request that was made by people living rough on the street, from the moment we started trying to put on shows and bring in the homeless to watch. “Put on a show one day just for us. We don’t feel comfortable getting in the same line as the other people, because we smell different and we don’t have clothes.” So, the desire to unite ended up scaring them away even more, you know? Because this thing of inclusivity is also cruel, because they are at a disadvantage. You are including a person in a territory that he does not feel he belongs to, which is quite perverse. So, sometimes, the segregation that we often think of as cruel, can simply make the person feel like they belong, because you’ve created a space for them and for those like them.

**VTM:** Dona Carmen it's a pleasure to have you here today. As I've already asked Lucas and Verônica, I would like to know what do you do, and how did you come to work in the Luz Neighborhood, where the Teatro de Contêiner is located?

**DC:** I'd like to talk a bit about our project. So I currently coordinate the *Tem Sentimento* ('Feel') collective, which is an income generation project for cis and trans women. I came to the region at the end of 2013 as a socio-educational advisor – the person who makes initial contact with those living on the streets. I started working in an organization and I left it but continued to carry out self-care workshops in the neighborhood, every Saturday for cis and trans women. In these workshops they would have their nails done, do their make-up, and draw pictures, you know?

**VTM:** Oh, and at the beginning were you working there alone or with a group of people?

**DC:** I was alone, just me and the vulnerable women who helped me a lot, so I thought of doing something for men, right? At the time I was thinking about doing a workshop to help men living there, so I thought about doing up their sandals. Then I thought, "Wow, it so easy to think of something to do for men. And how difficult it is to think of something for women, right?" Then I started thinking about what they needed most in this neighborhood. Then I thought: "Wow, what they need are panties, right?" Because women menstruate, you know, and they don't have anywhere to wash their panties. So I did a workshop around sewing panties. We would make a template, cut the fabric, and then sew it by hand. So, when I did this workshop, I realized how sewing brings out our memories and emotions, right? My mother sewed, my aunt sewed. So, the subject ended up being this memory, right?

**VTM:** So it was an artistic project that you began to develop in a similar way to what we tried to do when we thought about fostering a creative environment together before going back to perform there. But the difference is that you also saw it according to their needs – I mean in terms of having a real impact on their lives.

**DC:** Yeah, that's when I thought about the project to generate income through sewing. It started with a workshop in General Osório square in the open air, and now I have – [*she stutters*] No, I have a ... space: the Teatro de Contêiner from Mungunzá.

**VTM:** Your relation to the Teatro de Contêiner is important for us, because it reveals different layers of the artistic work that have become possible since the space was set up. You mentioned that listening to the radio together was a way of drawing out memories and emotions. If we consider, alongside the income generated, the kind of relationships that sewing can form, what kind of affection do you think people in these workshops are looking for?

**DC:** So I think that in the beginning, when I started working here, it was difficult on both sides, right?

**VTM:** To establish a relationship you mean?

**DC:** Yeah, but I think I was very well received in this place, also because I look like one of their relatives. Everyone says: "Oh you look like my aunt, you look like my mother." So there's that. It's comes from that memory of someone's mother or aunt. And they also have this need, you know, you get close to them, you touch them, right? Receiving a hug – it's important because they don't have that contact. Unfortunately, quite the contrary – people want to distance themselves from them, right? I see some here who, even when going to buy something at the bar ... they have the money and the merchant serves them on the sidewalk. Not even inside the bar. So it's not even about having money.

**VTM:** What's your take on the artistic perspective of the work that you have been doing?

**DC:** I think that since I've been working in the Mungunzá space I've been thinking more about it. I've realized that sometimes we do a lot of work related to culture and we don't have a clue, right? We talk about our work a lot like: "Ah, it's social assistance work, right?" And it's not, sometimes you're there too, promoting culture,

but you don't have a clue that you are; when we turn on the radio and listen to music it brings out memories; or we see art when we have a free space for them – like free painting sessions. So we are also promoting art – and we have no idea about that, right? I think that being there, in that space today, I see art in everything, I see the culture involved in different things. Sewing, for example. Because you're creating. Yeah, so I see the culture there in the sewing, too. While we sew, we listen to the radio.

**VTM:** Dentinho, I am glad I have the opportunity to talk to you. I would like to kick things off by asking if you could explain what the experience of living in the surroundings of Teatro de Contêiner is like, even before the theater was set up there?

**DENTINHO:** So, right now I'm living here, in the Luz neighborhood, my name is Cleito Ferreira, known as Dentinho on the street. Dentinho is the guy from the street, it's a political name, which was born on the streets, right? I lived on a sidewalk for a few years here, but I've lived in the center of the city for seven years already, right? The guy on the street, he lives in a state of flux, he lives in a community, an active community that works in a highly collaborative sense. Like, it's a living co-op over there. Everyone is helping each other. So, I've lived in several places, several contexts, several sidewalks there, where we made this family, this *maloca*.<sup>3</sup> And then, knowing how to articulate yourself in the city, knowing how to live in the city, breathing the city, is living in it. So I am one of those residents who has lived in this place, and still lives here today. I've been in the city center for over 10 years.

Today I am a visual artist. I graduated from *De Braços Abertos*<sup>4</sup> (*With open arms*), which provided this workshop environment where we did various activities. It starts with things like sweeping the streets but they also offer other activities, such as haircuts, bicycle maintenance, and art workshops. So, I trained as a visual artist within this context, before the arrival of Dória's government, which ended everything.<sup>5</sup> And now I'm a visual artist because of *De Braços Abertos*, because of the project ... So today I work at *Birico.Arte*,<sup>6</sup> which is a street art and culture collective which works with us, and has an average of 42 artists, which made up the collective during the period of the pandemic. I am also part of the *É de Lei Coexistence*

*Center*, where I am a harm reducer. I know harm reduction like the back of my hand, as I was on the streets too. The great woes of people living on the streets today are due to a lack of public policies, where housing, education, work, and other issues that would bring security are not offered. And security just discards all the work that is done by the people who work here, because there is this sea of violence, and I am one of the bodies that was violated when I lived there. I was partially blinded in my left eye because of a gas bomb<sup>7</sup>, and I spent a year inside that place, without seeing.

**VTM:** And how did you get into art coming from this background?

**D:** So, I've always had this inner fantasy world, and then I started to understand political empowerment. When I had a crack pipe in my hand I wasn't seen, but when I was reading a book people noticed me. Any reality, any difference, I feel that I am the same being. And I brought culture into the *fluxo*.<sup>8</sup> I started to take a book stand that I used to sell from on Paulista Ave into the *fluxo*. Because I used crack, I smoked, you know? My relationship with the substance – I was always thinking about how I would get money to buy more drugs. But I started to see another side, man, I started to see that the people who were there also had the right to culture. My alias within the *fluxo* and in the prison system (because I was arrested already for stealing books, so I've been through the prison system) is 'teacher'.

**VTM:** Dentinho, I found this word *fluxo*, 'flow', especially interesting because somehow it is also related to a movement in theater, it's a term very much used in theater practice when we want to emphasize the non-rational aspects of the group's involvement in an exercise. I know that in the Luz neighborhood it is used in a different way. Could you please talk a bit about that, and what your take on it is.

**D:** Without wanting to romanticise it, the *fluxo* is also a cultural flow. A person who comes to *manguear*<sup>9</sup> is not just asking for money, but is also exchanging a good story for money, like I give you this story and you give me your money. Nobody is just asking for things, they are being creative. Because the term *manguear* comes from the hippie movement in the 70s, when people came to sell their art,<sup>10</sup> exchange ideas, and create stories, in places like that to earn money. And to this

day they do it. And then when you go around restaurants, making up stories and telling them to people before asking for some change, you are making art. You're creating art there, creating a character. You create a character, even if it's not true, but there you are acting as a character. It's an act. These guys are artists, man. It's called the art of the invisible.

**VTM:** It's an interesting idea to think about the values of a creative process when the urgency of survival doesn't offer any possibility to think about an autonomous space for creating your art. In this way creativity is deeply embedded in your immediate reality. There is this urge to make yourself visible, making up stories in order to get some change to eat, and I assume that's more or less what you mean by 'the art of the invisible'.

**D:** The art of the invisible is where you only see it from one angle, as if it's something ordinary, but you don't even look at it from an artistic angle. But it's an everyday kind of art, the very life of the person living there is an art. He makes his life there art. The art of the invisible. And it's every day, it happens every day, in our midst.

**VTM:** And how do you find a way to make your art visible? Because it seems that your art is also engaged in building up a critical discourse about the immediate reality, so it's also necessary to create a more distant perspective where one might be able to reflect on it.

**D:** So, I make interventionist art, and I have some works where I look at the city and make artistic interventions on the landscape. One of my paintings that went viral, which everyone wants (which is cool), is a can saying that it is a pipe.<sup>11</sup> It was inspired by Magritte's surrealist work, in that you take the object, and put a painting on it saying "That's not a pipe." It's actually not, it's a portrait, right? I took his idea and used it on a can of Guarana.<sup>12</sup> First I crushed the can, then drilled a hole in it, and took a picture of it, writing: "This is a pipe." And then, sort of showing off the art, showing off that, while Magritte brought surrealism, we bring the art of realism.

**VTM:** Again, I think your perspective is interesting because it seems



to imply a critique of a piece of art that, although playing with reality and representation (as is the case in Magritte's painting *The Treachery of Images* (*La Trahison des Images*)),<sup>13</sup> is a closed circuit about the values of art, whilst your creation seems to create a clash between the fields of art and immediate reality. In your practical life how do you feel the set up of an artistic venue such as the Theater of Containers created a juxtaposition with the tough reality of the Luz neighborhood?

**D:** The Container Theater emerged out of a demand to bring art and culture to people who do not have access to it. It was there that I entered a theater for the first time in my life, when I was in an extremely vulnerable situation. And I wasn't questioned for sitting there. Today I have access to theater, and other things thanks to this cultural space that has guaranteed me this bond. Look, my first art exhibition was in the Theater of Containers. After that I had five exhibitions. But they gave me access to a place and made other people look at me differently; I wasn't just the crack addict anymore. Sometimes when talking about this place, before it took the name Cracolândia, I used to (and still do) say that we lived in the Luz (light) neighborhood. And it's really cool that you take it like that, "I am from the Light." And then for us there is "Ah, he is from the darkness," "No, I am from the Light."

You use a metaphor like that, and you already bring a wealth of soul and value. People say, "Oh, that place is full of darkness, zombies ... etc.," I don't know... so I respond "No, no, I am from the Light." This name [Cracolândia] was created by you, but I'm from the light, I live in the Luz neighborhood.

**VTM:** After talking to Dona Carmen and Dentinho I have a better idea of the impact the creation of the Theater of Containers has had on the area. Lucas, Verônica, how do you see the creation of so many opportunities emerging from that space?

**LB:** I would like to talk about the creation of the space through my understanding of performance, because at first one might've thought about it as a play – I mean the creation of this space as a one-night event, because we came from theater and it was easy to think of the creation of the theater as a play, an instance. You go there, you

perform and you finish. In our case, we would finish by welcoming people inside the theater we created. But we don't think about it as an event anymore, because we were already treating the space as a performance alongside everyday life. Now, because of the theater, it's possible to think about art integrated with life. So, for us, the Theater of Containers is really a space that facilitates the building of relationships. The Theater of Containers facilitates the relationship between various subjects and actions. For example, there is a healthcare facility there, which galvanized different situations for us where the theater could be a place to gather people and art collectives.

So, when you have collectives moving around all the time, you have a melting pot of aesthetics, meetings and transversal subjects. In the sense that you have mental health programs, damage reduction, architecture, theater, music, and visual arts – everything gathering there.

**VTM:** I get what you mean; the space becomes a creative hub in and of itself because it needs to shelter different perspectives and the goals of the artists and people who live in the area.

**LB:** I think that we, the Mungunzá Company that created the Theater of Containers, are just one more element in the area that gives way to other possibilities. We end up being one more element inside this performative protocol that is the space, which triggers people within that context to make their own propositions.

**VTM:** And what is the development process like when you make a new play? How does the area itself perform within your creations?

**LB:** We work according to a conception of art that is mixed with life, so it's necessary to respect the creative process because that's what gives form to the play. It's important to live the creative process. For us to come up with the new performance *Epidemia Prata (Silver Epidemic)*,<sup>14</sup> we had to spend a lot of time in the Teatro de Contêiner. So the area ended up embedding itself in us, then we'd get into the creation space and began to build the world of the performance. So this was our flow, our 'fluxo.' So there is a lot of this

change in ourselves which is surprising because we were creating a performance to establish a direct dialogue. And it was a bit prickly, because there was no direct representation of that community in the piece, although they were part of the process, they rehearsed with us and gave us ideas: Dentinho for example directed a scene. So the vulnerable people living there would follow the rehearsals, commenting on some scenes and helping us create the new play.

**VLTG:** You talked about representation, but I think the important thing is that in *Epidemia Prata*, our new play, we don't talk about them – we talk about us in relation to them. That's why I think the play is fair to the topic presented. In fact I think *Epidemia Prata* is our truest work because we are talking about ourselves, our incompetency, our inefficiency, and our hypocrisy, we are talking about ourselves in relation to them.

The interviews made it possible to understand that the powerful work carried out in the region by these artists reveals not only an art that intends to be relational, –or an object that is not autonomous and therefore strongly linked to the need and practical objectives, such as the sewing workshops of D. Carmen –, but also an artistic process in which the creators intend to act with as little mediation as possible, courageously inserting their body into a risky reality.

These artists are less concerned with the object that can be created than with a process of engagement, in which presence is always stronger than a mediated representation. Not only is the constructed work not autonomous (that is, detached from the implications of the reality in which it is inserted), but neither is the artist.

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## Notes

- 1 Link for the video recording the action can be found here. <https://youtu.be/X9HCnTj9oF4>.
- 2 The action includes a long period of planning in order to carry out mass protests to be fast enough to go unnoticed by the police. For more see the documentary *Dia de Festa*: available <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4b9-sSb31AUandhttps://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xn2um8xhc4o>
- 3 *Maloca* is a Brazilian word used for describing a shanty.
- 4 De Bracos Abertos is an organization that takes care of homeless people, usually addicted to drugs or alcohol.
- 5 Doria was the mayor who ordered the destruction of the derelict houses mentioned before and a great enthusiast of the project Clean City.
- 6 Birico.Arte, to be found on Instagram. <https://www.instagram.com/birico.arte/?hl=en>
- 7 In some contexts, a gas bomb is used to evict people from their tents so that they no longer can shelter on the streets, and would be forced to move.
- 8 Fluxo is the name given by the population that lives in the neighborhood to the gathering of people using substances.
- 9 *Manguear*: Brazilian slang for 'to beg'
- 10 Usually inexpensive jewellery.
- 11 Cans are usually used to smoke crack in the area. indented right
- 12 One of the most popular soft drinks from Brazil. Cans in general can be used for smoking crack when the person does not have a pipe; sometimes made from pens and bottle caps.
- 13 It's a 1929 painting by Belgian surrealist painter René Magritte. It is also known as *This Is Not a Pipe* and *The Wind and the Song*.
- 14 This play talks about impoverished teenagers that paint their bodies silver to get the attention of passers-by to ask for money at traffic lights or sell candy among other things.