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AH 399

Brazilian Pop Art: Art As Critique of Military Regime

When tasked with defining the style that appeared on the New York scene as a response to Abstract Expressionism in 1967, John Sandberg makes a few concessions about Pop art. Firstly, he acknowledges that "the artists themselves are remarkably elusive in their statements, from which few concessions are drawn."[1] However, noting that the subject matter of American Pop art typically consists of homages to mass consumer culture, such as Andy Warhol's *Campbell Soup Cans* (1962) and Roy Lichtenstein's *Crying Girl* (1963), he summarizes that "the goal of Pop Art is not simply to present, but to transform our contemporary American consumer economy into ambivalent and provocative forms."

However, the key word here is ambivalence. While some critics such as Collins argue that the use of American consumer culture as high art subject matter in Pop art "was affirmative…rather than a form of political critique,"[2] Roy Lictenstein himself stated, "Pop art looks out into the world; it appears to accept its environment, which is not good or bad, but different, another state

[1] Sandberg, John. "Some Traditional Aspects of Pop Art." *Art Journal* 26, no. 3 (1967): 228–45. https://doi.org/10.2307/774918.

[2] 3 Bradford R. Collins, Pop Art: The Independent Group to Neo-Pop, 1952-90 (New York: Phaidon, 2012) referenced in Rogoski, Larissa Couto. "Neo-Pop in Brazil: When Pop Art Addressed Politics." *Neo-Pop in Brazil: When Pop Art Addressed Politic*. Thesis, Digital Commons at Lindenwood University, 2021. https://digitalcommons.lindenwood.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1046&context=theses.

of mind."[3] Regardless, (with some exceptions[4]) the genre of 1960's American Pop art seemed to steer away from one thing: a clear critique of politics.

It may be odd that despite the particularly culturally provocative and expressive period of 1960's America, the New York Pop art scene was fairly devoid of political commentary on growing American concerns, such as Cold War fears and the war in Vietnam. Rather, it seemed that the counterculture sentiments that defined the decade were instead disseminated more pervasively through different "artists"— those of a musical kind. While Bob Dylan crooned "The Times They Are A Changin" and Sam Cooke bellowed "A Change is Gonna Come" to rally American masses towards liberal progress, the Pop artists of the 1960s seemed to stray behind.

Although the Pop art movement originated in Britain and the United States, the iconic nature of the genre allowed for Pop to quickly spread as a new style to the rest of the world. However, global artists took the potential of Pop further than their American contemporaries, and utilized the easily-recognizable nature of iconic imagery as a means of social and political criticism. Furthermore, the appropriation of American Pop art into a global genre was also used as a tool to express criticism against American influence and interference abroad. Most notably, the hybridization an American art style and critique of American interference in global politics can be seen in the "New Objectivity"[5] movement of Brazil in the 1960s. It was the critique of Americanization in Brazil and themes of "violence, urban overcrowding, individual alienation,

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[3] Gloria Ferreira and Paulo Herkenhoff, Mario Pedrosa: Primary Documents (New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 2015), 200, referenced in Couto, 2021.
[4] See: *Race Riot* (1964) by Andy Warhol
[5] For purposes of this paper, I will use the terms "New Objectivity" and "Pop" interchangeably, as in a 2015 interview with Tate Modern Marcello Nitsche uses both terms.
Tate. "Artist Interview: Marcello Nitsche." Tate. Tate Modern.
https://www.tate.org.uk/whats-on/tate-modern/world-goes-pop/artist-interview/marcello-nitsche.

state surveillance, and other manifestations of systemic deficiencies and local idiosyncrasies [that] dominate[d] Brazilian art in the 1960s."[6]

Thus, I would like to discuss the means in which Brazilian artists such as Marcello Nitsche and Hélio Oiticica participated in a critical discourse of an oppressive military regime, and the consequences they and others suffered from as a result of these anti-government works.

Before addressing the means by which Brazilian artists used the genre of Pop art to provide a critical commentary on Brazilian politics, it is important to address the political landscape of the nation in the 1960s, specifically the US-backed 1964 coup d'etat and the military dictatorship that followed afterwards. A simplified history is as follows: the incoming president João Goulart of Brazil in 1961 was initially supported by the John F. Kennedy administration, yet aid in the form of financial support, IMF assistance, and development backings quickly dwindled when political opponents claimed Goulart had communist leanings. After Goulart refused to meet American demands to remove his left-leaning cabinet members from office, U.S. ambassador to Rio De Janeiro, Lincoln Gordon, expressed to the (then Lydon B. Johnson) administration that failure to give military aid to Brazil support a resurgency and removal of the president "might make Brazil the China of the 1960s."[7] Thus, "Operation Brother Sam" was put in place, and the United States supplied a naval task force to aid in the coup to overthrow Goulart. On March 31, 1964, the coup began, and by April 2, the U.S. government recognized the new dictatorial leadership of Brazil— one that would last for twenty years.

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[6] Bentley, Brian William. 2020. "Pop Artists of Underdevelopment: 1960s Brazilian New Objectivity." Order No. 28088498, New York University. https://link.ezproxy.neu.edu/login?url=https://www.proquest.com/dissertations-theses/pop-artists-underdevelopment-1960s-brazilian-new/docview/2462421789/se-2.

[7] Spektor, Matias. "The United States and the 1964 Brazilian Military Coup." Oxford Research Encyclopedia of Latin American History, 2018. https://doi.org/10.1093/acrefore/9780199366439.013.551.

Coincidentally, the Civil Rights Act of 1964 arrived in the U.S. Senate only five days prior. Historian Anthony W. Pereira notes, "In a week when millions of African Americans were finally having their rights of citizenship recognised by the US government, Brazilians were losing theirs."[8] In the years that followed, free speech was severely limited and artists were censored by the oppressive regime.

With the political context of 1960's Brazil noted, it can be seen why the addition of American elements (both being the inclusion of American iconography and the appropriation of an American genre) to the Brazilian New Objectivity style was seen as a means to critique American influences in Brazil. Sao Paulo's Marcello Nitsche confronts the 1964 coup in his work, *I Want You* (1966) (Fig. 1), by referencing the iconic 1917 American World War I recruitment poster of Uncle Sam. Although the title of "Operation Brother Sam" had not been declassified by the CIA yet, I find it ironic that the "Uncle Sam" figure was used in this work.

A fairly simple composition, Nitsche replicates Sam's outstretched finger in a Pop art-like cutout but adds a stuffed red droplet from the tip of the index finger, resembling blood. The symbol, once representative of American patriotism and designed to rally citizens to join the front lines of one of the bloodiest wars in history, is undoubtedly recontextualized with the blood added. The thrusted finger is making an accusation, almost as if the viewer themselves is being blamed for the spilled blood. Quite literally, there is blood on Uncle Sam's hands.

[8] Pereira, Anthony W. "The US Role in the 1964 Coup in Brazil: A Reassessment." *Bulletin of Latin American Research* 37, no. 1 (2016): 5–17. https://doi.org/10.1111/blar.12518.

While he never commented on the exact meaning of the work, Nitsche did mention in an interview that he "sought to use visual elements of everyday life, practicing a language that the Brazilian people already knew. Based on this language, I inserted a criticism about the system."[9] Thus, due to the use of American imagery, it is accepted that Nitsche is being critical about the U.S. involvement in Brazilian politics.

It wasn't just Nitsche's *I Want You* that evoked a critical sentiment towards the new regime. Another one of his works, titled *Buum!* (1966) (Fig. 2)[10], features a street sign pointed to the left with a warped latex extension of the top of the arrow, with the comic-book like speech bubble affixed to the right side. In a 2020 NYU dissertation titled "Pop artists of Underdevelopment: 1960s Brazilian New Objectivity," author Brian Bentley believes that *Buum!* "suggests, in another apparent national allegory, that failing to take a left turn could prove disastrous."[11] The failure of taking a "left turn" as described by Bentley refers to the right-wing military regime of Brazil.

While Nitsche never claimed any explicit identification with the movement, scholars agree that his work follows the progression into the eventual creation of a distinctly Brazilian subgenre called the Tropicália movement. Coined by artist Hélio Oiticica in 1967, it is considered one of the most significant cultural movements in Brazil. Some argue that Tropicália found its origins after Oswald de Andrade's *Anthropophagic Manifesto* of 1928, which asserted that "Brazil's history of cultural cannibalism, adopting and adapting from other cultures, was its greatest

[9]Tate. "Artist Interview: Marcello Nitsche." Tate. Tate Modern.
[10] "Buum" can be translated to "Boom" in English.
[11] https://enciclopedia.itaucultural.org.br/obra11795/buum Bentley, 2020.

strength."[12] The "cultural cannibalism" of appropriating other styles can be exemplified through the adaptation of American Pop as means to create Brazilian works in the "New Objectivity" style. Again, referring to American iconographical style to encourage a critical discourse about Brazil's repressive regime was a component of Tropicália that Oiticica used for his own works.

The movement has been described as one that "coincided with the turbulent and violent moment in Brazilian life," aimed to "confront the dictatorship" that followed the 1964 coup, and even aligned itself with the "hippie movement" of the late 1960s in the United States.[13]

Tropicália creator Hélio Oiticica created an iconic banner that was displayed by dissident creators and artists with similar Pop mechanism and style. The banner, which was mass produced in a variety of colors (but tended to be displayed in either white or red) featured a silkscreen print of the corpse of Alcir Figueira da Silva, a bank robber who committed suicide in 1966 whilst being chased by police (other sources say the figure is instead a friend of Oiticia's, Cara de Cavalo, who was also killed by military police[14]). Alongside the body are the words "seja marginal, seja herói" (be an outlaw, be a hero) (Fig. 3). References to traditional American pop can be seen through the use of silk screen printing, such as Andy Warhol's *Marylin Diptych*. However, contrary to Warhol's image, Oiticica's banner used a system of mass production popularized by Pop art, but yet the work also had a concrete function that also deviated from that of Nitsche's *I Want You*—to be widely reproduced.

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[12] Bentley, 2020.
[13] Dunn, Christopher. "'Experimentar o Experimental': Avant-Garde, Cultura Marginal, and Counterculture in Brazil, 1968-72." *Luso-Brazilian Review* 50, no. 1 (2013): 229–52. http://www.jstor.org/stable/43905260.
[14] Sergio Bessa, Antonio. "Marginalia." *Review: Literature and Arts of the Americas* 39, no. 2 (2006): 210–12. https://doi.org/10.1080/08905760601015017.

Through the creation of this banner, Oiticica "comments on the State displaying its unique power to annihilate all 'unsavoury' forms of life in the margins, no matter how paltry, and he extols criminal striving as a direct assertion of faith in the attainability of joy."[15] It was a risk to display this seditious banner, and a concert in a Rio club in October 1966 was closed down by Brazil's Department of Political and Social Order for doing so.[16] In 1968, the banner was displayed by Tropicália musicians Caetano Veloso and Gilberto Gil at a festival. Both musicians were later imprisoned for two months and deported in 1969 for their acts of resistance.[17]

However, the momentum of progressive social change through Tropicálista art came to an abrupt end in December 1968, when Institutional Act Number 5 (also known as AI-5) was put into place by the Brazilian military regime. As a result, free speech and habeas corpus were suspended, and progressive artists at the time were censored, imprisoned, or both. It was a dark era for Brazilian creatives; Tropicália music artist Rogério Duarte was arrested and tortured, poet Torquato Neto committed suicide, Oiticica fled to the United States, and Nitche's works shown at the National Expo of Brasilia were destroyed by the military.[18]

Yet despite the constant threat of violence, artists continued to rebel against censorship and surveillance, emblematic of the spirit of the Brazilian people to continue to fight against oppression. I wrap up my paper with this: a rallying cry published soon after the IA-5 was

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[15] Hélio Oiticica, 'Anotações sobre o Parangolé', in his Hélio Oiticica: Aspiro ao grande labirinto, ed. by Luciano Figueiredo, Lygia Pape and Waly Salomão (Rio de Janeiro: Rocco, 1986), pp. 70–83 (p. 82) referenced by Karl Posso. "An Ethics of Displaying Affection: Hélio Oiticica's Expressions of Joy and Togetherness." *Portuguese Studies* 29, no. 1 (2013): 44–77. https://doi.org/10.5699/portstudies.29.1.0044.

[16] Karl Posso. "An Ethics of Displaying Affection: Hélio Oiticica's Expressions of Joy and Togetherness." *Portuguese Studies* 29, no. 1 (2013): 44–77. https://doi.org/10.5699/portstudies.29.1.0044.

[17] Dunn, 2013
[18] Nitsche, 2015

implemented that was representative of the long road ahead to democracy. On December 14, 1968, a "weather report" that critiqued the regime happened to evade military censors when it was published in *Jornal do Brasil*, a largely-circulated paper. Although the weather was sunny and clear, the report read:

> *"Weather forecast – rough weather*
>
> *Stifling heat*
>
> *The air is unbreathable*
>
> *Strong winds are sweeping the country"*[19]

[19] Rowe, John Carlos. "16: Criticism and Cultural Journalism in Contemporary Brazil." Essay. In *Literary Culture and U.S. Imperialism: From the Revolution to World War II*, 123. New York: Oxford University Press, 2000.

Figure 1.

Marcello Nitsche

I Want You (1966)

Dimensions and medium unspecified

Museu de Arte Moderna, São Paulo, Brasil

Figure 2.

Marcello Nitsche

Buum! (1966)

Oil, latex, galvanized sheet on wood fiber sheet

109.00 cm x 81.50 cm

Location not specified

Figure 3

Hélio Oiticica

Seja marginal, seja herói (Be an Outlaw, Be a Hero) (1967)

Screenprint on fabric

104.9 × 89.9 cm (41 5/16 × 35 3/8 inches)

Philadelphia Museum of Art, Philadelphia

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Figure 1:

Matheus, Isabella. Buum! n.d. Https://Www.uai.com.br/App/Noticia/e-Mais/2014/05/20/Noticia-e-Mais,154851/Exposicao-Reune-Em-Bh-Obras-Que-Fizeram-Resistencia-a-Ditadura-Militar.shtml.

Figure 2:

Nitsche, Marcello. *I Want You*. *Tate*. Tate London, n.d. https://www.tate.org.uk/whats-on/tate-modern/world-goes-pop/artist-interview/marcello-nitsche.

Figure 3:

César and Cláudio Oticica. *Seja Marginal, Seja Herói (Be an Outlaw, Be a Hero)*. n.d. *Philadelphia Museum of Art* . https://philamuseum.org/collection/object/299661.