

Dora Longo Bahia and the Post-Medium Situation in Brazil  
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The ten days I spent in Sao Paulo, Brazil last November hardly qualify me to speak at length about the contemporary art scene in this gigantic and remarkably dynamic nation that has so often captured the popular imagination of people in other countries. None-the-less, while I was there giving two lectures at the University of Sao Paulo, I did have the opportunity to meet some major artists and intellectuals who impressed me deeply, so I would like the chance to introduce a few videos of one of these artists, Dora Longo Bahia. Yet to introduce her is necessarily also to speak of an earlier and more shadowy compatriot named Marcelo do Campo, who apparently also produced clandestine films in the late 1960s and early 1970s at a particularly harsh moment of political repression following the US-backed military coup there in 1964. This tragic event led of course to a 21-year military dictatorship ending only in 1985 that was enormously profitable for US corporate capitalism. (Things are far more hopeful at present for the popular classes in Brazil following the election in 2002 of Luiz Inacio Lula da Silva of the Workers' Party. In 2006 Lula da Silva won a landslide re-election with a large popular mandate. I personally witnessed the greatly increased spending on education nation-wide that is one of the many salutary consequences of this recent election. )

It is with this troubled historical backdrop in mind that the emergence of Dora Longo Bahia and the disappearance of Marcelo do Campo must be understood. Born in 1961, Dora Longo Bahia literally lived her childhood in the shadow of a military junta that was no friend of vanguard artists and intellectuals on the left. As if to mark the momentous transition that occurred in 1984/5, Dora Longo Bahia first emerged as an artist with the demise of the military junta during those years. In 1984, she was in group shows of graphic artists in Sao Paulo, as well as in Panama, and in 1985, her work was selected for the 8th Salao Nacional de Artes Plasticas in Rio de Janeiro. Since then she has won critical recognition in a variety of media covering printmaking, paintings, and videos (two of which we will show tonight) through inclusion in over forty group shows and over a dozen solo exhibitions, not only in Brazil, but also in Argentina, Belgium, France, and Switzerland. One of her major recent shows consisted of an intriguing presentation of the films from 1969-75 of a previously "unknown" artist, Marcelo do Campo, at the Centro Cultural Maria Antonia in Sao Paulo.

As the videos shown tonight can only intimate in an abbreviated way, her “post-medium” artistic practice (to borrow a phrase from Rosalind Krauss) is remarkably broad-ranging and, at first glance, quite “eclectic,” ranging as it does from perceptual-based and deformalizing strategies like those of Lygia Clark or Helio Oiticica to a brash engagement with mass-cultural kitsch of the US & French culture industries on behalf of a more irreverent popular response to it. Cerebral, lean, and sobering in some art works; campy, effusive, and ironic in others, she produces work that is deeply “dialogical” on several competing fronts that never quite converge. At one point using James Joyce along with the textual orientation of Conceptual art, then at another using widely circulated television shows from the US as raw material for her baroque-like visual carnivals, Longo Bahia has a trajectory that, like that of Gerhard Richter, oscillates back and forth between a discursive field framed by photography and one that is organically inflected by artisanal traces that keep the human touch in full view.

Similarly, as the videos chosen for viewing tonight will show, her work can go from minimal perceptual encounters that productively defamiliarize experience in a manner linked to Russian formalism of the early 20th century, or the New York School of the 1960s, to the type of formal excess and surplus aesthetic that kitschy image-makers find impossible to resist in the corporate world of advertising. Uncompromisingly aloof, on the one hand, and indiscriminately “populist,” on the other, her art work frequently counter-poses the scattered viewing inherent to the society of the spectacle with a sovereign denial of spectacle more in keeping with a Zen-like meditative state of early avant-garde cinema like that of Stan Brakhage or Kenneth Anger. In short, the dialogical interplay of these two disparate aesthetics reminds us of how she deftly negotiates a contemporary situation once identified by the German philosopher Theodore Adorno (and still valid today), namely, that the fine arts and mass culture remain torn halves of a culture that fails to add up to a coherent whole -- far all their undeniable vitality and compelling promise of something otherwise.

\*\*As for Marcelo do Campo, I will say no more about this mysterious figure, than to point out that Dora Longo Bahia “rediscovered” his oeuvre. It is an oeuvre which now serves as a monument to the “unknown artist” at a time when mainstream society, especially in the US, remains more interested in “monuments to unknown soldiers.”