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Gambiólogos: of digital, of analogical and of cultural elements

Fred Paulino, Lucas Mafra

Fred Paulino is visual artist and designer, BA in Computer Sciences at UFMG (Federal University of Minas Gerais) and in Contemporary Arts at UEMG (Minas Gerais State University). Creates works in diverse media, from graphic experimentations, urban interventions and video to electronics and systems programming. Was creative director of Ossô Studio and one of the founders of Coletivo Mosquito. Collaborator of the Graffiti Research Lab and coordinator of its Brazilian branch, the Graffiti Research Lab Brasil.

Lucas Mafra holds a BA in Product Design at FUMEC (Culture and Education Foundation of Minas Gerais), and an autodidact in electronics. He projects, draws and build electronic products and lamps from recycled materials and holds a large experience in the use of LEDs and in circuit bending. He collaborates with the Graffiti Research Lab Brasil.

We started a dialogue with two founders of Gambiologia Colective. The collective is based on “*gambiarra*” tradition, which is the adaptation and improvisation in order to find simple and creative solutions using low resources. The Collective is formed by Fred Paulino, Lucas Mafra and Paulo Henrique Pessoa [Ganso], and they have presented works in many exhibitions. The group presents discussions about inclusion, indeterminism and the “*gambiarra*” aesthetics. Fred Paulino and Lucas Mafra were present in this interview.

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9jQmQ48-mrc>

Video 01: Gambiociclo in Interólogos Gambioactivos Event at Belo Horizonte-MG, Brazil

V!RUS: Fred and Lucas, thank you for accepting our invitation! The theme of this issue of the magazine is “Cultural initiatives and digital means” and we would like to talk about this theme in relation to the work of Coletivo Gambiologia. Could we start from a brief introduction of your work?

Fred Paulino: We're a trio of artist-designers who started working together in 2008 for a commissioned work, which was going to be used in a piece of communication about the festival Arte.mov¹ in Belo Horizonte, Minas Gerais. At that time, I had a design studio and I invited *Ganso* (Paulo Henrique Pessoa) to develop Gambiologic Armour² with us. He also invited Lucas Mafra to collaborate, and the work was very well received, being invited to join art gallery's exhibition of the event.

It was a healthy encounter, we appreciated each other's work although we didn't know each other very well, but happened one of those coincidences of the "right thing at the right time". The works were very complementary and we got excited to do other projects collectively, which has happened incessantly ever since. We have made electronic objects, exhibits, sculptures, paintings, lanterns, inspired by the culture of improvisation of *gambiarra*, maintaining a strong link with a Brazilian esthetic of precariousness and proposing a dialog about that precariousness with contemporary art, digital or analog, interactive or not.

VIRUS: Interesting! What would the "elements of popular street culture" that you incorporate in this work?

Fred Paulino: They are spontaneous interventions in the day to day, which can be observed principally in metropolises, especially in third world countries, which have fewer resources and material scarcity... The *gambiarra* culture, improvising with that which one has at hand, a type of almost seminal creativity that does not demand a technical or academic education to resolve a certain type of practical problem. What has been called "social innovation". We seek to incorporate those ideas and let ourselves be influenced by hawkers, street vendors, sound systems, scrap metal collectors, street artists. To capture a very spontaneous type of creativity that arises in that context and apply it in an artistic context, always using electronics. It is a type of "methodology of improvisation".

VIRUS: That idea of improvisation relates closely to the notion of "non-determinism", suggesting that each work remains open and its result will depend on circumstances.

What circumstances do you think are most central in this process?

Fred Paulino: I think the circumstances, in this case, will be more linked to the audience that consumes the work and to the space in which it is presented. Each work connects in a distinct way. Some are really only meant to be seen, and in that case the work implies just in itself a

¹ Arte.mov: they refer to the 3th. Mobile Media International Festival in 2008, held in 'Palácio das Artes' in Belo Horizonte-Brazil. The festival was a place for development and critical reflection about "the art of mobility", searching for other creatives possibilities in the mobile and locative media disciplinary field. Source: <http://www.artemov.net/sobre.php> and <http://www.gambiologia.net/blog/2009/05/20/artemov-2008/>

² The Gambiologic Armour is a mobile wereable device, developed by Gambiologia Collective with low cost technologies. Source: <http://www.gambiologia.net/blog/2009/05/20/a-armadura-gambiologica-the-gambiological-armour/>

great portion of the message. Other works, like Gambiociclo³, for example, are more mediators of an experience than a completed object – and in that way they depend in great part on the context in which they are presented. The very circumstances of the creations of the works also have an influence, depending on the resources we have in that moment, and even on the timeframe of completion!

VIRUS: This idea of improvisation is also present in the process of creation of the works? That is, when conceiving of a work, even without the participation of an audience, you do not know precisely what the result will be?

Fred Paulino: Yes, we prefer that in fact. The majority of times we also try to make the most possible use of what we already have in the workshop, avoiding buying new components, reusing... I believe that this makes the works more spontaneous and, therefore, more human.

In general we do have a final objective regarding how the work will result, but the form itself is only defined at the moment of creation.

VIRUS: This edition of the magazine VIRUS is about the relationship between digital platforms and cultural initiatives. We would like to know what impact the digital element has on your work, with what objective is it used, in general?

Fred Paulino: The digital element makes possible a “transversality” in every sense, besides being inevitable these days. In some cases we use digital elements as creative resources, as a form of achieving a necessary “technique” in a project – for example, the use of microcontroller programming –, in others the digital factor is used in a more subtle way, only as an extension of the analog, for example, we need a computer to create adhesives. The digital is also necessary to push us one step beyond, to consider the gambiarra culture not just an esthetic reference (which would be nothing new), but as alternative ways of resolving problems, be it in the physical domain – the real world – or the virtual/digital world. It is almost like a difference between “gambiarrento” and “gambiológico”. The digital makes this entire dialog between low tech and high tech possible. The very hacking of codes is a type of gambiarra.

VIRUS: Is there a focus in the collective on allowing the audience to appropriate ways of using these digital means? Whether it is on the low or high level of technology, the gambiarra culture would presuppose an opening for improvisation on the part of the public that consumes the work, correct? Therefore, it would work like a stimulant for creation. Does this remain true for the digital element?

³ Gambiociclo: it is bicycle which has low-tech devices and digital media, a mobile broadcast station used in Gambiologia's practices. Source: <http://www.gambiologia.net/blog/category/artwork/gambiociclo/>

Lucas Mafra: We have a focus on distributing information in workshops, for example, in order to transmit the knowledge in a more solid way, more palpable. We want our audience to absorb more information and awaken to gambiological creativity, which opens the doors to more possibilities, therefore it does stimulate, we like to say that we “release” the creativity of the person during a workshop.

Fred Paulino: For me the ways of using digital media appear more spontaneously these days. Everyone is born using the Internet and can learn to program reading half a dozen online tutorials. It may seem paradoxical, but the great difficulty, today, in my opinion, is skill with the analog, the artisanal, the manual. I think that Gambiology is more focused on saving these skills, showing that they are not really so distant from what is understood to be technology. As Lucas said, we always joke that our offices offer “analog inclusion”, as digital inclusion is already provided by the government through simple access to the Internet.

V!RUS: This interest is related then to two fronts: the education of the audience, in some measure, and the education of the multiplier? Would that be one of your focuses? To what extent does the collective have interest in conforming networks based on its initiatives?

Fred Paulino: Certainly. I think the works that are recognized as digital art, are still very cold, dependent on technology X or Y, very connected to an idea of the digital as technological sampling. It is a subtle trap in the industry that takes over creative platforms. I miss the more human aspects, more sensory, in the majority of works, and a necessity for the audience to know a background in order for it to be “understood”, which is demanding too much. For me, art has to be more spontaneous. In that way, for me we end up helping educate the public, the works speak for themselves, people recognize themselves, enjoy without the need to read an art history book. (Which does not mean we do not interact with [art history]). The formation of multipliers and networks comes from that basis, the offices are always very well received, the audience leaves with a more demystified vision of technology (or technique). The formation of networks arises naturally from this contact between the audience and other artists, and we make a point to share all these experiences, be it by distributing pamphlets, making material available on the site, proposing collective expositions – like we did in 2010 – and now with the magazine FACTA, which we launched in August.

V!RUS: From a point of view of dialog with other groups, artists and collectives, is this idea of amplification of understanding through networks a reality? Would that be as much in the sense of the propagation of your work as, in the inverse sense, the feedback of the collective through exchanges and conjoint reflections. In that case, would the use of the Internet take an important role in the very construction of the ideology of the collective?

Lucas Mafra: The Internet is a basic need. From the point we’re at it is impracticable to live without it. It is the great keeper of everything.

Fred Paulino: With each contact with other groups, the understanding of our work is amplified. That's fascinating. Because we are not theorists, academics, lecturers. Before anything else, we're artists, we want to put our work out there in the world, and that would supposedly be sufficient. But it's very interesting that this feedback through networks, be they virtual or in person, really amplifies the understanding of what we're doing, and there is always an important link with other creators. For me all artists want, in one way or another, to influence and to be influenced, and in my personal opinion, for me it is indispensable, and we concern ourselves with also having good documentation of the works, because it is on the basis of that material that the audience gets to know the work without needing to be present.

VIRUS: The use of the Internet in interventions can at times be hindered by problems of punctuality, like the lack of a good connection, the timing of the communication to remote partners, and even the very willingness of the audience to interact remotely. Have you noted resistance of openness on the part of the public to being active (or not passive, as is the habit in events promoted by commercial initiatives, for example) in the interventions?

Or maybe you work with people for whom that resistance is smaller? In that case, do you have interest in reaching other audiences?

Lucas Mafra: The use of the Internet in Brazil in certain places is complicated, because we are deficient in terms of speed of connection (megabits per second), and that sometimes gets in the way. But in relation to our projects and work, we always attempt to interact with the audience through our offices, interventions, etc.

Fred Paulino: In reality remote projects don't really interest us that much. I think that resistance is due, in part, to the fact that it is very uncomfortable to depend on a device, or signal, for the work to take place. Sometimes it's technically complicated. I'm not saying that artists shouldn't explore that, but as I said before, for me that there is still a lack of the sensory element, of emotion. I really think we're moving in a different direction.

VIRUS: Even if that communication means coming closer to distant realities, to erase limits between diverse groups, or even to suggest that face-to-face contact could be stimulated from that mediated experience? Would the sensory element and the emotion be less present in a communication for the fact of being mediated by technology?

Fred Paulino: For me that is the discourse of the service providers and their advertisements. I even understand that face-to-face contact could be encouraged, and it is possible that a certain degree of "emotion" be present when having a video conference, otherwise examples like *chat roulettes*⁴ wouldn't cause such repercussions. But as a method of artistic expression I still find it lacking in that regard.

⁴ Chat Roulettes: website based on chat through text or video, which randomly pairs users in order to communicate with each other.

Lucas Mafra: I think the audience interacts with ease, as they identify with our “gambiarrenta” Brazilian esthetic, our informality makes interaction easier.

VIRUS: In an initiative of the “Territórios Híbridos” project (Hybrid Territories), we use the Internet to allow graffiti artists from São Carlos to put graffiti on walls in Belo Horizonte from a distance, and vice-versa, for graffiti artists from there to put graffiti on walls here, using projections. More than that, the idea was to allow the population without an affinity for graffiti to put graffiti on tablets and understand the strength of these gestures in terms of expression in public space.

What do you think of this type of use, which does not involve videoconferencing by its conventional definition, nor necessarily spoken word or textual language?

Fred Paulino: I think that there are the beginnings of tools that make the transposition of those barriers possible, but in practice people prefer a more face-to-face experience. Almost always, even, successful projects in that direction are intimately linked to an analogous experience, or attempt to reproduce one, to simulate one. The challenge that I am issuing would be how could the digital, by itself, with the exclusive particularities of its “alphabet”, propose unprecedented experiences, without seeming to be very cold or to enable those mediations. Or, maybe, how to be interesting and reach the audience beyond that mediation.

LaserTag⁵, for example, was an absolute, unquestionable success. In my opinion it is one of the best works of the century, but to a great extent its merit can be attributed to the fact that it humanized the digital while at the same time digitized the gestural. There is always an analogous, simultaneous experience.

VIRUS: Yes, its value is doubtlessly that it allows “laypeople” to experiment with the gestures in creating graffiti and to understand graffiti in other ways.

Fred Paulino: And what’s more, a great part of the merit of LaserTag is, also, that it was not used commercially by Graffiti Research Lab⁶, the very political gesture is already very relevant and in a certain way completes the work.

Open source⁷ is a manner of political action. Even with formal politics it sometimes moves in the opposite direction.

VIRUS: Do you identify others of your works as also being digital “by nature”, with their own alphabets, like you said above?

⁵ LaserTag: software developed by Graffiti Research Lab, which allows people make digital graffiti using laser pointers. Source: <http://www.graffitiresearchlab.com/blog/projects/laser-tag/>

⁶ Graffiti Research Lab: Group that Lucas Mafra e Fred Paulino are collaborators. Graffiti Research Lab is responsible for creating interfaces as Eye Writer, among others, doing a reinterpretation of graffiti through the use of digital media. Source: <http://graffitiresearchlab.com/>

⁷ Open Source: Open Source Initiative is dedicated to construction and collaborative redesign of softwares with open-source codes, among other premises, in opposition to proprietary softwares which are closed-source code. Source: <http://www.opensource.org/docs/osd>

Fred Paulino: I don't believe so, maybe at most in our ironic treatment of videoconferences with a recent project, Malas Chat⁸.

V!RUS: We would like to ask you a final question. How do you envision your work in a few years' time? Not necessarily the collective work, but the format or the the concepts or even the type of event and the results that they'll be composed of?

Lucas Mafra: We'll have more experience with showier and shower gambiarras. I would like to reach the goal of 50 workshops for now, and then 100. I believe there are so far there have been 17. We have already gotten the hang of the thing; the last one at SESC Belenzinhos⁹ produced excellent results. Lamps were created with LED lights in various aluminum cans. None of them battery powered, all with used cellular phone batteries, which we had by the ton.

Fred Paulino: For me we're part of a moment in which people are starting to get uncomfortable with the massacre that the technology industry practically forces on us, with the excess of consumption in every sense, the lack of alternatives for dealing with industrial byproducts, the resources always concentrated in the hands of the same global actors. The artist almost always dialogues with the questions of his time, that discomfort is not exclusively ours. I think we're representatives of the moment, in a certain way we catalyze that discomfort, in a creative, playful, practical, spontaneous way, seeking to escape discourses that are easy and convenient for capitalism, like the sustainability discourse. The valorization of the Brazilian culture as a displacement from the axis of influences in the arts, who knows... There are many creators concerned with that, and the strength of the term Gambiology, which needn't be exclusively ours, may agglutinate those experiences and I hope that, in the future, people remember our work that way.

Lucas Mafra: I agree with Paulino, people are uncomfortable, but they're waking up.

V!RUS: That idea of displacement of the influence axis in the art is quite beautiful and powerful. Well, we'd like to thank you both for your time once again. It has been a very rich and pleasant conversation.

Fred Paulino: Great guys, thanks for the opportunity.

Lucas Mafra: Thanks, see you soon!

⁸ Malas chat: A suitcase that has resources for a livestream communication such as videoconferencing.

⁹ The SESC Belenzinho is a unit of the SESC (Social Service of Commerce) in São Paulo. A workshop was developed by the Collective Gambiologia on June 3, which aimed to build LED luminaires.