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Coexistence in everyday life

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"We arrived with a theater project and consolidate a cultural center." At hearing this, some people would believe that the Pombas Urbanas [the Urban Pigeons], as the members of this group like to be called, are either modest or naive. Neither one nor the other thing. The Pombas are fully aware of the scope of the work they realize. It is true that sometimes they seem surprised to see the good results of the different projects they put into practice, but they know perfectly well that it results from rich and complex processes, for which they are very attentive.

Formed in 1989 by director Lino Rojas young from São Miguel Paulista, eastern São Paulo, the group today is responsible for the Centro cultural Arte e Construção in Cidade Tiradentes, also in eastern São Paulo. Officially *Instituto Pombas Urbanas*, it develops several activities, programs and cultural activities with communities of Cidade Tiradentes, in the transformed space of a large abandoned warehouse where the group was established in 2004. The Pombas began in Cidade Tiradentes in doing theater. Today, their daily activities involve theater, circus, dance, music, graffiti, radio, literacy, telecenter, among others. The main focus of activities is, as they say, strengthening the cultural identity of people in the community, and understanding their needs and capabilities so they can enlarge their human capabilities and solve common problems collectively.

Partner of Nomads.usp in some research projects, the Pombas Urbanas is therefore a group of people who experience, in their daily lives, several coexistences. As actors, they experience the simultaneous existence of a character and a person, a public face and an other, particular, occupying the same space. As executors of cultural projects, they overlap cultural activities and community, local management and management in public instances – federal and state spheres, and even private. As a theater group linked to the reality of Sao Paulo peripheries, also live with other more central realities etc.. They experience the notion of coexistence in

many ways, different and simultaneous.

We talked for two hours with the Pombas Urbanas in November 16, 2010, *via* MSN, on these issues, and we present here the record of this conversation. The VIRUS journal is immensely grateful to Pombas for this interview.

VIRUS: We want to talk about the relationship between you and the community, and on how you act as inducers of several things in this environment. The fact that you live in Cidade Tiradentes or in nearby neighborhoods influences the relations between you and the community. Can you make some comments about that?

Pombas Urbanas: Yes, of course, being in the neighborhood changes everything. The Pombas have their origin in the periphery, in Sao Miguel Paulista, and due to a lack of space the group went to live in downtown Sao Paulo. When we found the warehouse¹ it was abandoned and we discussed the need of coming to live here. We realized that it was not possible to carry out this project from where we were, there in downtown. It was comfortable, but it was not feasible. We had many facilities as those who live in downtown: theaters, opportunities, job, transportation, recreation... But we could not carry the project out from there. We decided to live here because it was a choice connected to our history.

VIRUS: What kind of activities you used to do with the community at that time? Basically street theater?

Pombas Urbanas: The group has always made research on theater languages, dramaturgy and actors training. The pieces speak of Sao Paulo from our peripheral poetic standpoint. When we first arrived here, 800 people signed up for courses, out of curiosity. Suddenly there were people dressed like "first communion" in an space in ruins! Many abandoned the course. From this generation, some young people remain today. They formed the group *Filhos da Dita*, that is co-responsible for CCAC (Centro Cultural Arte em Construção), along with Pombas.

VIRUS: When you say it was not feasible "to carry the project out from downtown", you refer to the operational side or to the expected results in terms of experiences, for example?

Pombas Urbanas: Both. We had no resources and, at first, we started taking tons of rubble away with bare hands. If not for that practical attitude, the project would not have happened. But there are also the links, the feelings, the relations. The community lead us, giving clues to what was necessary to do. We arrived with a theater project and consolidated a cultural center.

VIRUS: In the beginning, we guess that your influences on the community were more visible than the opposite – in other words, the influences of the community on you?

Pombas Urbanas: We went to the market dressed as characters to establish relationships

¹ The warehouse, on 2100 Matalúrgicos Avenue, in Cidade Tiradentes, is the headquarters of the Instituto Pombas Urbanas Institute and houses the Centro Cultural Arte em Construção. (www.pombasurbanas.org.br)

with the community. People understood perfectly that communication, like the popular artists from the northeast, the puppeteers²... We also staged scenes for children. People did not know us, but asked about Zimbo, about oxen³ etc.. We also installed sound devices behind a wall and created radio drama characters. For the community, it was a somehow wacky young group but suddenly children and grandparents were embarking on that madness. It didn't take long for young people also to embark. They influenced us with their dreams by asking when they would have music, books, dance. From there came the project requested by the community. We just did not agree to get food, because our space does not have an assistential purpose, but a cultural one. This is what we can offer.

VIRUS: To some extent, did this public face you used for the contact with the population serve as a protection for your private lives? The costumes of animals, etc....

Pombas Urbanas: At first, we were concerned in not establishing too extensive personal relationships in the sense of our private lives. From the buildings around, all eyes were on us.

VIRUS: Was it a deliberate care you took?

Pombas Urbanas: We could not give any kind of bad example. We "played monks":-)

In the beginning, the subprefecture persecuted us, spreading rumors that here we would open a *Bom Prato*⁴ popular restaurant (food for R\$ 1.00). Then we made a counter-gossip: we said that if not for the theater, they would open here a *Fundação Casa*⁵. Of course, the community preferred "the pigeons"!

VIRUS: You said that young people "influenced you with their dreams", but in which sense?

Pombas Urbanas: Imagine an area of 1600 m² in a place where everything is lacking... People asked if we would have here everything they imagined. We used to spend the entire day here ready to listen and to interact with people. Especially at that time, children came and projects were being conceived. Games became circus workshops, circus became literacy⁶, literacy led to the library ... And thus projects were emerging.

² "The puppeteers is usually a man of great ability to improvise and invent stories situations with dolls, playing with the public and making criticism of social mores. This popular artist walks from village to village, carrying and bringing entertainment and information, awakening the spirit of joy wherever he goes."

Simões, C., 2008. Breve passeio pela História do Mamulengo, *Revista Raiz*, Seção Figura. Available at: <http://revistaraiz.uol.com.br/portal/index.php?Itemid=190&id=1105&option=com_content&task=view> [Accessed December 2010]

³ Zimbo and the oxen Filet and Mignon, characters in the plays by Pombas Urbanas.

⁴ Project for popular restaurants created by the State Government of São Paulo.

⁵ Fundação Centro de Atendimento Socioeducativo ao Adolescente - CASA (Foundation Centre for Socio-Educational Services for Adolescents), an institution linked to the Secretaria de Estado da Justiça e da Defesa da Cidadania de São Paulo (Secretary of Justice and Citizen Protection of São Paulo), former FEBEM - Fundação Estadual do Bem-Estar do Menor (State Foundation for the Well-Being of Minors), where young offenders are sent to.

GOVERNO DO ESTADO DE SÃO PAULO. Fundação Centro de Atendimento Socioeducativo ao Adolescente - CASA. Available at: <<http://www.casa.sp.gov.br/site/paginas.php?sess=1>> [Accessed December 2010].

⁶ Action developed by the group to stimulate children's interest in learning, with reading groups, from the observation that many who attended courses at the cultural center were not yet literate, despite their advanced scholar age.

In the first year we had only funds for the project "From community to theater, from theater to Community", by the promotion law⁷. When we realized, we had about 20 ongoing projects funded with only this project's resources. Then we began to organize ourselves for management and fundraising.

VIRUS: We realize that the actions in the warehouse have diversified in the last years, and now you offer several courses and activities to the population; how does it work as a vector of rapprochement between you and the community? Does it make this relation easier or more complicated?

Pombas Urbanas: Last year, we placed a guest book at the warehouse's entrance. At the end of the year, Néia, who is the responsible for the library and for the guest book, said that more than 35,000 people had passed by here. The community was occupying the space. To offer a program that matters is important but it is also important the kind of relationship that we establish between us.

VIRUS: Yes, but beyond quantitative terms, do you see significant qualitative changes in the community from the contact with the courses and activities you offer?

Pombas Urbanas: People help us to take care of this place, they suggest activities. Children, friends and relatives of those who are artists and also managers inhabit the warehouse. The *Filhos da Dita* is the best example. Jéssica, who now manages the resources of the CCAC, belonged to that group of children, which we have already spoken about. Young members write projects and get funds, they make the communication tasks, they performed in Belem do Para, Colombia, Goiania, and even T Instituto Itau Cultural, in Sao Paulo.

Furthermore, they also have good results in other projects such as the group of graffiti. They became professional and received some awards, as well as the circus group that is already giving classes for children, among others.

VIRUS: How many people are today part of the Pombas Urbanas?

Pombas Urbanas: The core team has about 30 people: veterans, trainees and fellows, as well as volunteers and contributors from outside the neighborhood. Most of teachers are from here. The guys learn and multiply themselves. This is a constant.

VIRUS: Does this multiplication occur both inside and outside Pombas Urbanas? Do they take part in projects elsewhere?

Pombas Urbanas: So-so. Today, these guys remain here. But there are also people who were here and now are taking part in other projects. One example is Gabriel, who learned lighting technique and later worked at SESC cultural centers. Those who feel more affinities with us remained. Some children say they want to be educators, for example. But we also provide services for unions and companies: the group *Os Fuxiqueiros* has been performing a lot, and also the *Maracatu* one. Anyway, this was a very laborious year...

⁷ Lei de Fomento ao Teatro de São Paulo - 3ª edição) (Promotion Act to São Paulo's Theater - 3rd call.

VIRUS: The Pombas has a role in articulating different levels: among community, funders, cultural public agents, private institutes, academic researchers and so on. How do you evaluate this process and these activities in terms of difficulty, of being worthy, etc.?

Pombas Urbanas: We just want to do theater! :-)

VIRUS: Yes, which is what you do the less, at the end... or not?

Pombas Urbanas: The Pombas is a theater group which reflects its origins, show clear positions, takes part, having a citizenship awareness. We know that the CCAC has become an important space in its neighborhood and our action resonates out there as well. But this project belongs to the community. We strive for it to create, produce and manage its own cultural production. Then we will be able to enjoy this corner of the world only to make art... or to make the community even more present in our art, our poetry... But the community should be ahead of the management, concerned with local development, with its problems of health, education and so on.

VIRUS: That is, in the future the prospect would be the Pombas and the CCAC to depart a little from each other? If so, what about, in this case, the aspects of finance and management from public bodies, for instance?

Pombas Urbanas: We do not know it yet. But Pombas will be present, although the space is open to everybody. The Pombas is privately managed⁸, it is legally responsible for CCAC. This transfer to the community is still difficult: we feel that young people are engaged but they are still in training. With older people it is very different, we are a 21 years-old group. There is no doubt that being here doing theater is our life project.

VIRUS: Was this a strategy from the beginning or this only became clear over the years, in the working process? That is, did you imagine from the beginning that at a certain moment you would want to be more distant or not?

Pombas Urbanas: When we arrived, Lino⁹ imagined that such training would happen in about three years. Without his experience, we are already in our fifth year and we are not satisfied yet. Many things are taught to us by the neighborhood dwellers; there is no a particular methodology. We are creating with them the answers we need.

VIRUS: But the work grew far more than Lino might have imagined himself, didn't it?

Pombas Urbanas: We don't know. Many things he thought with us. There were many hours of conversation listening to Lino, he imagined things and took our imagination along. We did not even understand exactly what he said! But when he was gone we realized that this knowledge was already in us.

VIRUS: We would like to go back to a point that we have covered earlier about the work you

⁸ The Instituto Pombas Urbanas is an OSCIP - Organização da Sociedade Civil de Interesse Público (Civil Society Organization of Public Interest) since 2003.

⁹ Lino Rojas, Peruvian director and playwright, founder of Urban Pigeons in 1989 and its director for 15 years.

develop as articulators in different levels: between community, funders, cultural public actors, private institutes, academic researchers etc.. Of course it evolves from a knowledge that has been developed and accumulated over time. Can you please speak a little bit on the experiences involved in this work? Because in the end, it is about making feasible the coexistence of multiple agents at different levels.

Pombas Urbanas: When we first arrived here, Lino stressed that it was necessary to "dialogue", through our practice. There were no walls in the warehouse, but we had to make classes. Lino said that people would only believe in us if they saw visible practices. Everybody saw us as kids. So we represented, sometimes, disguised as businessmen, policymakers, pundits, architects (!), but what people take with them is our practice. They see that we really believe in such madness. But we also seek knowledge, on how to improve our communication, and the transparency in the projects. We plan actions with everybody in the group (from the cook to the interested student). Everyone can help in creating and carrying out projects, they know the resources. Some people find it strange, but thus we are building all collectively. And other external agents, as they arrive here they finish by being part of this practice. Thus they realize that this construction is not in our personal benefit, but collective.

VIRUS: Now talking about some other sphere of relations, between the communities of Tiradentes and the rest of the city and, in many ways, the society, it is clear that your work helps the community to reorganize itself. But how does it create – or not – links with other communities and other social classes?

Pombas Urbanas: Oh, we recall a story... Last year, a group of teachers from one school was looking for something to propose to *SPTuris*¹⁰ to be a tourist spot of Cidade Tiradentes, and proposed the CCAC theater. Cidade Tiradentes, a neighborhood whose tourist symbol is a theater! At that same school, the students took as example the newspaper that we do for creating a neighborhood newspaper. It is nice that our presence helps to produce a different image of the neighborhood. Now, even the bus conductors use the warehouse as a reference to the bus stop.

On the other hand, a graveyard of the PCC¹¹ was found here these days. People talked mostly about that. In an episode of an evening tv series dealing with abortion, a girl took the bus 'Cidade Tiradentes' to go to an illegal clinic. This negative image is very strong. We imagine that when we leave the neighborhood producing art with these young people, it can create a good confusion in people's mind.

VIRUS: And in the opposite sense? Do you see any change in the way people from Cidade Tiradentes perceive the rest of the city? From the experience of working with you, for example?

¹⁰ The São Paulo Turismo (SPTuris) is a company of tourism and events in the city of Sao Paulo, which seeks to promote the consolidation of the city as a tourist destination.

¹¹ Primeiro Comando da Capital (PCC), a criminal organization.

Pombas Urbanas: Yes, very much. Today we realize that people living at the street just behind our warehouse come tidy to the avenue; the neighborhood organizations are seeking a more organized attitude, development projects like the *CEUs*¹², the *Fábricas de Cultura*, the French Cultural Center... That makes people feel stronger, to feel that they live in a place with more dignity, after all the neighborhood is being improved... The neighborhood always had the image of violence. People were very ashamed to live here. Today, a development project is undergoing. According to a local joke, this avenue is the Faria Lima¹³ from Cidade Tiradentes. Now, we have here even a store of Casas Bahia! ... (laughs) Local dwellers are already seen as consumers! (laughs)

VIRUS: From when we first were there in 2006, we remember that many people in the neighborhood had a very strong feeling against people from outside the district, a vision that arose from the social distance between them and the rest of the city. Do you think it has changed?

Pombas Urbanas: Yes, we do. Recently an entry to the Rodoanel¹⁴ was opened from Jacu-Pêssego¹⁵. People are feeling more as part of the city. There are still areas with great difficulty here in Cidade Tiradentes, as the Barro Branco area, for example. This is the periphery of the periphery. One year ago, we were there with a theatrical procession. We asked in the street where we could promote our work to some young boys and one told us: "Do it there in the college." It was the Fundação Casa in Ferraz de Vasconcelos¹⁶, which could be seen from the place we were. There's nothing in that area, only the Fundação Casa...

VIRUS: But besides governmental actions such as the rodoanel and the CEUs, but also the expansion of families' income and their access to credit possibilities, do you think that cultural activities play an important role in this effort, or not so great?

Pombas Urbanas: Sure, yes. This space became a space of coexistence, dialogue and creation. It creates an impact especially among children and young people. For example, we have just returned from Colombia. Overthere, communities make local development plans. They listen to children, elderlies and adults, and their plans are delivered to those who do participatory budgeting. Across all diagnoses, the communities overthere crave more about cultural spaces.

VIRUS: We have a last question!

Pombas Urbanas: Ok!

VIRUS: Does the future looks promising?

¹² Centros Educacionais Unificados - CEU (Unified Educational Centers).

¹³ Important avenue in the richest part of the city.

¹⁴ A perimetral road surrounding the city of São Paulo.

¹⁵ Important avenue in the east of São Paulo.

¹⁶ City nearby Cidade Tiradentes.

Pombas Urbanas: Geez!!!

V!RUS: lol

Pombas Urbanas: We won a promotion for a project called Revoada, and we will devote the next year especially to theatrical research. We invited two teachers, one from here and another one from Cuba, and also a musical researcher. Let's see how we transform all these stories into theater. And on the CCAC: autonomy, participation and empowerment! (laughs)

V!RUS: Could we include a fourth word in the three you mentioned?

Pombas Urbanas: Which one?

V!RUS: Coexistence? Among the many realities that you have to combine and put in contact from the cultural activities?

Pombas Urbanas: Cool! There is a stretch of *Ventre de Lona*¹⁷ in which the chorus speaks with the public. They say:

"Are we in here (on stage) and you are there? Or are we in there and you are here? Does it matter? Does it makes any difference? The show has not even started yet. The light has not come on the arena. Our show only starts when you arrive and we arrive, and it ends when you go away and we go as well...".

V!RUS: How beautiful! Thanks a lot, on behalf of V!RUS! We expect that Nomads have again common projects with you in the near future!

Pombas Urbanas: We're waiting for... Hugs to you @!!

¹⁷ A play by Pombas Urbanas.