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# To be or not to be: identity, history and alternative social outcomes in Brazilian Contemporary Art

LIVRARIAS  
HYPOTHESIS  
HISTORIA  
PERIODICAL

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**Abstract.** The following proposal aims at understanding the scope and outcome of politically engaged art practices when basic political freedom and artistic autonomy are not at stake; when artistic creativeness and actions happen without state censorship or cultural top-down enforcement but the economic framework, capitalism, upholds and controls social mobility, work relations, and commodity exchange. We'll explore the "what if" puzzle to think about these matters and to problematize a History beyond the "official" History. Methodologically speaking, we will focus on artistic situations developed during the Brazilian Military Dictatorship (1964-1985), specifically the actions of artists such as Cildo Meireles (1948), Anna Maria Maiolino (1942), and Artur Barrio (1945). Let's ask in a broader context if they would have taken place and if they would have been as resilient, and effective in exposing state violence if that had taken place in a context of liberal democracy. These are hypotheses that challenge the way we think and problematize decisive moments of Brazilian political and art history and make us ask "what if" things were easy-going for artists committed to advanced creative practices (with successful and profitable art exhibitions and a promising international career) but weren't for the most of the population?

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Keywords: Brazil; Contemporary Art; State Violence; Capitalism; Cildo Meireles; Anna Maria Maiolino; Artur Barrio.

## 1. Introduction

Our research will address art processes developed in the context of the political climate of the 1960s-1970s war on communism (the Plan Cóndor/ Operation Condór) [1]. We want to speculate how these specific artworks would develop and win their ground in the Neo-avant-garde realm if they had happened in a democratic context. We'll explore the "what if" device to problematize the History of Contemporary Art in an uchronic sense, according to *Alternative History* [2 – 6], through these specific artworks. Methodologically, we will focus on artworks developed during the *Brazilian Military Dictatorship* (1964-1985), precisely the actions of artists such as Brazilian born Cildo Meireles (1948), Italian born Anna Maria Maiolino (1942), and Portuguese born Artur Barrio (1945). Our main question is: **would these artworks have been as resilient, and effective in exposing state violence if that violence had taken place in the context of liberal democracy?** Democracies with an extermination agenda seem to go hand in hand with the democratic rule of law, and the state institutions that enforce those rules. The intrinsic contradiction of this binary reality is a social phenomenon that is not far from the type of mass destruction and political imprisonment that hardcore military regimes enforced. There is a significant distance between both political realities, but they are not as far apart as one would think.

How is this violence contextualised and reflected in the artistic practices of the neo-avant-gardes? And particularly in the contemporary art context, are individual artists aware and committed in their approaches to counter these phenomena of extermination and criminalization of the poor and left-wing political groups? And if so, how effective are they? How do these artists address within the art system the same social classes and ethnic groups (of European white descent, basically) that profit from this extermination and class struggle

environment when, knowingly to the art community, these are the same people that have the cash flow to acquire and speculate with artworks and promote and develop and bring to the limelight many of these artists?

For example, what if the stamped *one cruzeiro* bills with "Who killed Herzog?" (1970/1976), by Cildo Meireles, had new names added such as the ones of the victims of the Candelária massacre in 1993? Or of Chico Mendes (1944-1988) or of murdered MST workers? The violent death of Brazilian journalist Vladimir Herzog (1937-1975) during a questioning by the São Paulo branch of the DOI-Codi, the Brazilian political police was not an off shot in the methods of the security forces during the military dictatorship. Herzog was a well-known journalist, teacher and filmmaker, politically active. Suddenly the murderous "shock and awe" actions of state police terror were no longer targeting specific social groups and as it had happened in Chile and Argentina, intellectuals and artists became prime targets: nobody was safe. But what if this had happened in a democracy to an anonymous citizen as it seldom does? How would artists express these issues in their work? Is the artist's political consciousness only catalysed when the cultural and artistic domains are targeted?

Also, what would be the way out of Anna Maria Maiolino's *Hero* (1967) - a portrait of a generic "zombie" general - if that creature was replaced by a state bureaucrat, a Brazilian corrupt congressman or an evangelical tv priest? What if Artur Barrio's fake bloody body parts displayed on a Belo Horizonte riverfront, "Bloody muggles", in 1970 had been created weeks after the Carandiru prison massacre in 1992? **Is it plausible that these actions could have been thought, created, and given political aftermath in the democratic reality of contemporary Brazil?**

These are hypotheses that challenge the way we

think and problematize decisive moments of Brazilian political and art history and make us ask “what if” things were easy-going for artists committed to advanced creative practices (with successful and profitable art exhibitions and a promising international career) but weren’t for most of the population?

## 2. “To be or not to be”: research materials and methods

Harold Rosenberg quotes Willem de Kooning as telling that Austrian architect Frederick Kiesler used to hum the “International” every time he saw a Mondrian or any other Abstract painting [7]. This reaction derived from the connection in early modernism between non-referential, non-figurative painting and radical political change: abstraction was the image of social revolution. This humming resonates with our right to hesitate before radical art real social output and resonates in our questioning if art practices are any closer to saving us from human monstrosities. Radical change and pioneering groundbreaking experiences in art practices still made sense and were essential when the sphere of life, of social life, was under the clouds of repression and war but, one wonders what place occupies the concept of the readymade, of an alternative aesthetic recontextualization of utilitarian objects in the minds of those facing political and social violence, facing the permanent objectification of their lives?

Our “what if” speculation proposes to test these structures of ambiguity and their cultural impact as autonomous realities (art forms that have long left the realm of their authors and are expanded within curatorial processes and art critic dissemination) and as specific moments of authorship. The “what if” potential lies in the possibility of rethinking art history beyond the accepted narrative. As explained in the Abstract we will do so by displacing some

artworks that are ontologically related to the context of the Brazilian military dictatorship. What if there was no military coup in 1964 and Brazil’s democracy was an enduring reality like Venezuela or Colombia during the sixties and seventies? This hypothesis is somewhat of a provocation. Life would no doubt be different, thousands that disappeared and were violently killed would pursue their struggle and Brazilian society would probably reach new stages of emancipation and social development earlier than it did. We are aware of this.

In this research, the analysis unfolds transversally, bringing together facts and historical sources that are dispersed, however, positioned in perspective, to promote unlikely dialogues at first sight. It’s necessary to remember that the time scope between the 1960s to the 1970s represented a turning point for art practices in Brazil, mainly in the Rio–São Paulo art world/art circuit. The idea of revolutionary art, of radical practices in the tangency of non-art, breaking the bourgeois paradigm of art as a valuable and precious commodity is a good depiction of the creative and ideological environment of the time. These radical art practices privileged the experimental exercise of freedom, to dissolve the border between art and life and so boycotting the capitalist relationship between production and consumption.

Artists such as Hélio Oiticica, Willys de Castro, Artur Barrio, Cildo Meireles, António Manuel, etc for example, and female artists like Lygia Clark, Anna Bella Geiger, Anna Maria Maiolino, Lygia Pape, Mira Schendel, and Regina Silveira had a leading role in this effort to reject and disrupt the military. We also know that in Brazil, there was a huge movement of spontaneous emigration on the part of artists due to the military dictatorship. What if there was no dictatorship? Would these artists have left the country for other reasons? Would they have stayed in Brazil? How would this “stay” impact the art production of the 1960s?



We will focus on three specific artworks, with the aim of questioning them and building alternative paths for the historiographical narrative. We will analyse: “The Hero”, 1967 by Anna Maria Maiolino; “Situation T/T,1. Bloody muggles”, 1969–1970 by Artur Barrio and the “Ideological Circuit Insertion Project: Who killed Herzog”, 1970–76, by Cildo Meireles.

### 3. Present past and past present: an analysis in a historical perspective

#### 3.1 Who is the Hero?

Anna Maria Maiolino (1942), an Italian-Brazilian artist was one of the artists whose creative production in the 60s and 70s gained a political output focusing on the phantasmatic of survival against the backdrop of state and heteronormative violence— her own diaspora from post-war Italy to Venezuela, then Brazil, New York in the early seventies and Italy again, during the dictatorship in Brazil, is informed by this dual sense of pain and joy, uncertainty and fullness. She tests aesthetically and creatively through visual and performative actions like her 1974 super 8 film “Y” or, from the same year, photo series “Little by little – Photopoemaction” her ability to confront the social forces that naturalise absence and silence instead of real active voice in the life of women like her [8]. However, it is worth remembering that at the time, though feminist debates echoed in the practice of women artists, she always put aside this fact as decisive in her work. When she talked about her artwork she pointed out that there were no feminist inspirations.

In the year of the AI-5 decree, Maiolino became a Brazilian national and moved to the United States. She produced, early in her career, a portrait entitled “The Hero”; it’s an acrylic painting on wood, dated 1966. The original work was destroyed by a termite infestation and was eliminated in 1994 by

herself. Maiolino decided to create a new version and donated it in 2015 to the permanent collection of the MASP (Museum of Art of São Paulo). It is the only work by Maiolino in the collection of MASP. This artwork was shown for the first time at an art fair in the MAM-RJ in 1966. The work is also credited with participating in two important Brazilian exhibitions: “Opinion 66”, in 1966 and “Nova Objetividade Brasileira”, in 1967. From the mid-1960s onwards, a series of events promoted by MAM–Rio would make the institution the protagonist of new processes of rupture in the conception of exhibition spaces in the city.

According to her [9], “Hero” was conceived intuitively, built from an ambiguous sense of the tragic and the ironic powers of caricature and satire. The symbolic representation in vibrant colours of a military figure whose face is an expressionless skull, however, decorated and framed is not a neutral and passive visual statement. It plays an intentionally derogatory function. In formalist terms Maiolino’s work has some technical similarities with the hybrid materiality of icons in orthodox culture and to modernist “assemblage” because it is not just a painting: its surface houses real objects, medals, and other items that enhance the militaristic character of the “heroic” creature; these elements give the whole set, along with its morbid zombie character, a more vivid sense of the conflict and opposition between the signifier “hero”, a positive mythological signifier about humans who overcome extremely difficult and demanding historical tasks, and this pathetic figure, this incarnation of the true meaning of law and order when order is based on oppression and law on the arbitrariness of security forces: death.

Maiolino’s work was produced two years after the civil-military coup that installed the Brazilian Dictatorship. The enormous political, social, and cultural unrest in the global context was also a cultural and ideological catalyst for artists to believe

that social change and radical art were again re-connected as in the 1917-1932 period: the Cuban revolution, the independence of Algeria, the armed struggle in the Portuguese African colonies, the Vietnam War, the Civil Rights movement and the ensuing the Black Power movement, the Hippie Movement and its ecological stance, Allende's election in Chile, the growing criticism towards a consumer society and capitalist industrialism that engulfed the resources and the environmental health of the planet, the anti-nuclear armaments movement; the underground culture movement; the Feminist Movement.



Fig 1. Anna Maria Maiolino. *The hero*, 1967.

© 2023 Institute Vladimir Herzog. Used with permission, retrieved from Google Arts & Culture.

Source: <https://artsandculture.google.com/asset/o-her%C3%B3i-anna-mariamaiolino/AgHY1i4ZVOPtOQ>.

Artists took a stand and started to “build” what would later be defined by Brazilian history of art as a new generation, a generation divided out of exile and dissent. Maiolino reports [10] that until 1968, the militaries didn't succeed in undermining the field of visual arts actions. The militaries did not understand the metaphorical language used by the

artists, therefore, their works were not prohibited or destroyed at the time. After the AI-5 decree in 1968, violence and attacks against freedom of expression became increasingly latent, making it more difficult to circumvent social and cultural control instruments. It should be remembered that it is not just the figure of the military that refers to the history of authoritarianism and state cruelty in the Brazilian context. As a Portuguese colony and since 1822 as an independent State, Brazil is riddled with violent events related to its history of enslaving native communities and African populations.

What if nowadays Afrofuturism was something that had already been sustained and legitimised by Brazilian modernism? What if Afro-Brazilian artists and Indigenous artists were a reality in mainstream Brazilian art back in the twenties and they looked for creative processes capable of overcoming the “artisms” made in Europe? This could be another line of inquiry: what if this culture of hate, this prevailing unlawful apartheid, and recurring contempt for indigenous wisdom and knowledge hadn't become so present? What if the modernization and social progress of Brazil in the early and mid-20<sup>th</sup> century hadn't been based on this racial criminalization and disbelief of the other? Would these systems of exploitation and social reproduction of the “white advantage” had been sustained? Would Brazilian modernist culture have needed the indigenous and the Afro-American factor as an element of differentiation of its specificity against the European heritage background? Wouldn't the native and Afro-American cultural input have become intrinsic to Brazil's official culture (as they are now)? Wouldn't Brazilian modernism have been a process of disruption and overcoming produced by an indigenous and Afro-American-based culture instead of proof of the existence of artists and intellectuals beyond the European and western cultural realm? What if “Caliban” was not the exception but the rule?



This reality created and pervaded racial violence and oppression, naturalised inequality, and social injustice, and gave Brazil's European white population the political and economic upper hand. In the centre of this history of structural racism and civil war-like social dynamics one can grasp

the deterministic impact of Social Darwinism in Brazilian late 19<sup>th</sup>-century intelligentsia and politicians; derived from August Comte's positivism this theory of social regulation and evolution puts all social phenomena under the umbrella of the natural selection, the law of the fittest [11].

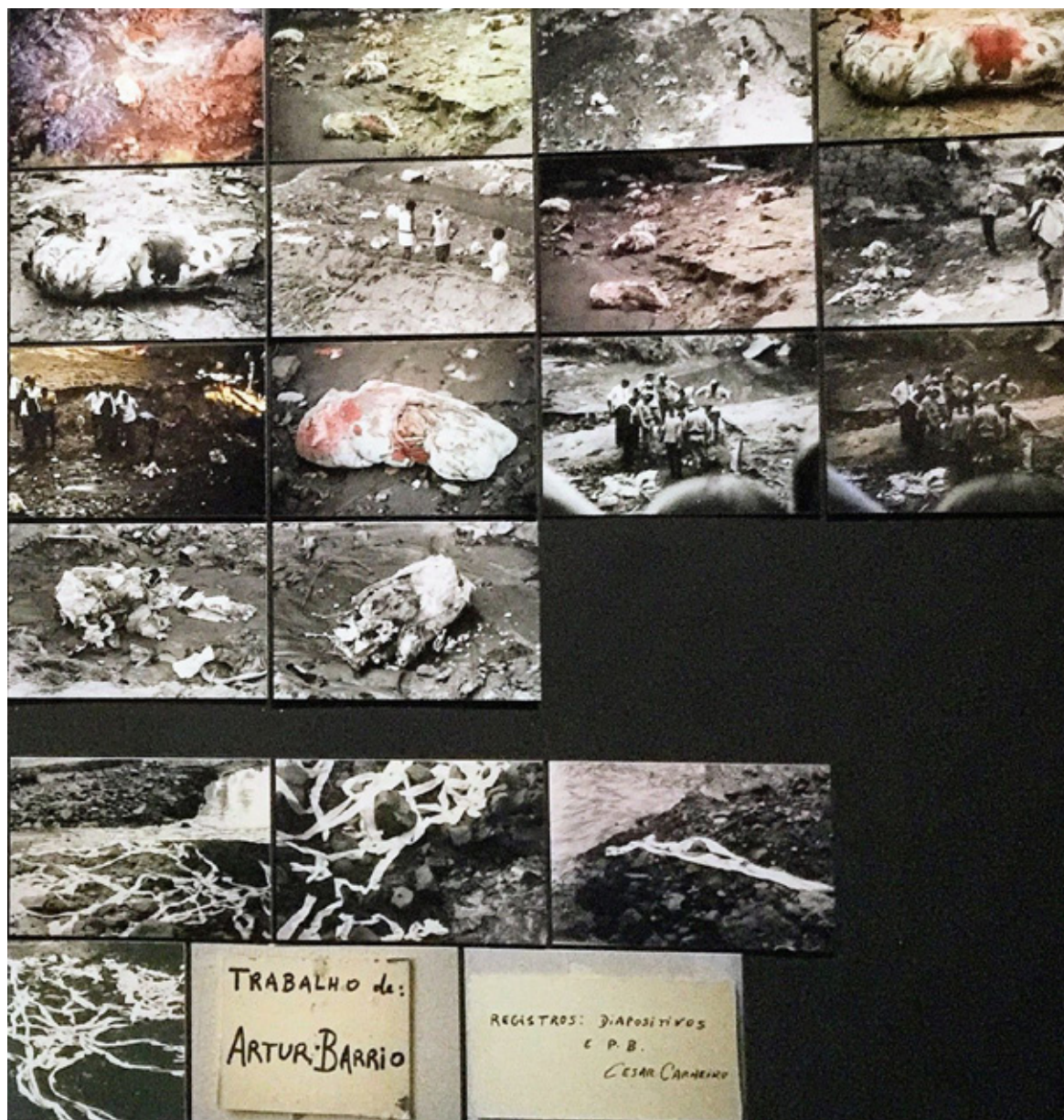


Fig 2. Artur Barrio. Photography. Framings of Situation T/T,1. Bloody muggles, 1969-1970. © 2023 Vera Araújo. The use of the images presented in this article meets the attribution Creative Commons Attribution-Share Alike 4.0 International — CC BY-SA 4.0 Creative Commons — Personal Archive.

### 3.2 Whose blood is the Muggles?

The works *Bloody muggles*, by Artur Barrio (1945) happened in two different actions documented by photo snapshots of the work process, the ongoing events (both the exhibition in a Rio de Janeiro art museum and the situation-specific created in Belo Horizonte), public reactions, public authorities interactions, and outcome, etc. The first occurred in the *Salão da Bússola*, in the MAM-Rio, in 1969, and the other in the famous Brazilian exposition “*Do Corpo à Terra*”, in Belo Horizonte, in 1970 [12].

This initiative was named “*Situação T/T,1*” (Situation T/T,1). During the Brazilian Military Dictatorship, many artists sought new paths in the “*métier artistique*”, a factor that will take the discussions of questions related to the meanings, modes, and themes of art to a boiling point never seen before. For example, the more traditional artistic languages and modes, such as drawing and painting, can no longer handle the complexity experienced under an authoritarian political regime.

The experimental intensity of Artur Barrio’s works and his detachment from conventional forms of art, reinvent and even destroy the tradition of “what is art” by estranging and decaying its materiality, by turning its presence into profane and fake theatrics and by exploring the abject and the repulsive as means of emerging the unspeakable into the core of art processes at the same time that he cancelled any aesthetic value within his artworks, Barrio and other artists of the same generation became the paradigm for what is known as “*guerrilla art*”, “*marginal art*” and “*live art*” [13]. In 1969 Artur Barrio wrote a “*Manifesto*” where he created the guidelines for a new language and visual aesthetic that privileges the new materials, such as banal, worthless, perishable, cheap stuff used in daily life [14]. The artist’s results are objects and unexpected situations in the art world. But that was the premise of the artist. He didn’t want to communicate with the “art world”, but, in

fact, just with the real world, the world lived and experienced by the poor, simple, ordinary people.

An interesting factor when analysing Barrio’s trajectory is that he already began his artistic training and experimentation during the military dictatorship. His beginnings as an artist were guided by a specific social and cultural context.

What if there was no dictatorship? Would Bairro have pursued this path of artistic-guerrilla action? Would there be resistance through nauseating sabotage of the given and dark irony upon the banality of death? Would there be the same critical questioning of the means and modes of art without an authoritarian agent imposing its “ethos” into the cultural and social agenda? Barrio’s generation coincided with the art collective named “*Fluxus*”. In the context of the consolidation of capitalist relations caused by the consumer society, the wide and unbridled access to goods and merchandise in general, there was also a critical look at all this exaggeration. Artists from all over the world, inspired by Dadaism and Surrealism (and Barrio was adamant about the influence of these movements against the supposed influence of Lygia Clark and Helio Oiticica), understood art as an ephemeral and playful expression, where they would break the barriers between what is conventionally perceived as art and what is not conceived as such [15]. Everything can be art. Everything is allowed, and anyone can make art. Art must be simple, understandable, communicable, without pretensions, and therefore, also without market or institutional value. Fluxus brought lightness and playfulness to art, through the unusual. It was anti-art. But the anti-art practised by Barrio and his generation of Brazilian artists didn’t use the same codes. The types of “jokes”, such as an example of muggles, were not funny.

It was bloody, strong, visceral, shocking, critical, a real battle, hence the idea of “*artistic guerrilla*”. In Brazil, the meaning of the term was coined by



Décio Pignatari, a critic of art, with the publication of “Theory of the Artistic Guerrilla” (1967), in the “Correio da Manhã”, Rio de Janeiro [16] and the critic Frederico Morais also conceptualized the idea of the “artist as a guerrilla soldier” and the practice of guerrilla art (1970) [17]. Internationally, the expression was used in the early 1960s by the Italian critic Germano Celant to designate as “notes for a guerrilla art”, Arte Povera which, from the use of common materials such as earth, stones, clothes, paper, and rope, evokes in a caricatured way the pre-industrial era, to the detriment of the industrialization and mechanisation process that Italy was going through.

Artur Barrio’s work was received in a lively way, just as the artist had envisioned. The police received calls about the discovery of abandoned bodies, the so-called muggles of Barrio. The artist circumvented the censorship by introducing his artistic work into the centre of violence, on the city streets and not inside the museums, the usual “white cube”, where the censorship commissions searched everything and stopped any expression

that seemed to go against the regime. But through these tactics’ artists were able to reverse the situation, “with the dictatorship facing art rather than art facing the dictatorship” [18].

### 3.3 Who was Herzog?

To close, we bring artist Cildo Meireles (1948) born in Rio de Janeiro, and like Barrio et Maiolino, with an artistic career starting from the Brazilian Military Dictatorship context onwards. His works held a true criticism of the political and authoritarian moments being experienced then. In the summer of 1970, he was invited to participate in the “Information” initiative at the Museum of Modern Art in New York York [19]. He received a letter from the curator Kynaston L. McShin, who had been to Brazil in 1969. To the “Information” event Meireles sent the proposal: “Insertions in Ideological Circuits” (April/May 1970) composed of two projects: 1) “Coke Project” and 2) “Banknotes Project”. The first consisted of recording information and critical opinions on glass bottles of Coke and then returning them to circulation.



Fig 3. Cildo Meireles. Insertions in ideological circuits: “Projeto Cédula”. 1970-76. © 2023 INHOTIM. Used with permission, retrieved from Google Arts & Culture.” Source: <https://artsandculture.google.com/asset/inser%C3%A7%C3%B5es-em-circuitos-ideol%C3%B3gicos-projeto-c%C3%A9dulas-cildo-meireles/8gE9m4t21caEDU>

The second project was where they recorded information and critical opinions on banknotes and then returned them to fast and normal circulation. One unfolding of the “Projeto cédula” is the work “Who killed Herzog?”, 1975. In the years of Censorship, specifically after the promulgation of the AI-5 (Institutional Article Number 5), Cildo Meireles stood out for his stamping on banknotes with the explicit message: Who Killed Herzog? He stamped “cruzeiros”, the name of Brazilian currency at the time, a strong question mark to the murder of journalist Herzog.

As referred to earlier in this paper Herzog had been strangled by political police agents during an interrogation at the DOI-Codi, and the crime was staged as a suicide. Vladimir Herzog was a martyr of the Military Dictatorship, violently killed for a political crime. Anonymously, Meireles showed his vision of art as a means of democratising information and showcasing social problems that were being sanitised and hidden by political censorship - which is why he used the enunciate in his works from this period: “the reproduction of this piece is free and open to anyone and everyone”, emphasising the issue of private law, the market and questioning the elitist commodity that art had become.

His art could not be held, taken out, excluded, or expelled from any art event by military censorship as its space of circulation and existence was not the fragile curatorial environment of the gallery or the art museum but the frenetic daily life of the city and its paper money exchange dynamics. “Who Killed Herzog?” was traveling in pockets, being changed from hand to hand. It was pure public art, available to all the people. Their symbolic value was real, but also unshakable because banknotes cannot be destroyed, they are heritages of capitalist society. The idea of revolutionary art breaks with the bourgeois paradigm that sees the work as a commodity and favors the experimental exercise of freedom, to “dissolve the border between art and

life”, an actual boycott of the capitalist relationship between production and consumption.

#### **4. Round Table Insight: Kaleidoscope of Ideas**

These reflections were presented at the 2<sup>nd</sup> International Conference of ‘What if?..’ World History, in 23th November 2022. If we look at the diversity of the themes discussed during this meeting one may think that dialogue was difficult and non-productive yet the first impression was that the “What if?” Conference catalyst has an enormous potential to enhance subjects that somehow remain lateral when compared with the more conventional wisdom of historiographic practices.

It’s this entropic atmosphere within a never-ending archive that gives ground and effectiveness to the what if clause. It can help us release new interpretative and new speculative awakening energy into the realm of Art History fields. It is also a catalyst that can empower ABR research methodologies and turn around some conventionalized readings of what artists have to say about art and about their peers’ practices. Alternative history and the what if catalyst have become in many cases (see artists like Vito Acconci, Charles Simmonds, Mark Dion, Fred Wilson, Kara Walker, Thomas Hirschhorn, Francis Alys, Ilia and Emilia Kabakov) a subtext which cements and gives density to art installations, videos, immersive atmospheres, participatory performances playfully exploring the very tenuous line between false and true, fiction and reality.

#### **5. Some concluding thoughts and future perspectives:**

We expect to continue the speculative exploration between the field of art theory and art history that the “what if?” catalyst provides. The Uchronia duality of vivid fiction and lived reality is a very

recurrent subject matter in art practice. We can even claim that Duchamp's "infamous" Pandora box "Fountain" was born out of a "what if" speculation: what if I, Duchamp, a French post-cubist painter, famous in New York for my "Nude descending a stair" (1912) picked up a random utilitarian object and send it to the Society of Independent Artists to be previewed as an artwork? What if instead of a naked male torso, even a cubist fragmented naked male torso, I choose something that is related to the biological dimension of a male human? So, this intellectual device, "what if?" can be a methodological back up for Art Based Research when it deals with more conformist and conventional renderings of modernism, avant-gardism, neo-avant-gardism, art, and the state, art and the social sphere, etc, etc. Yes, ok, we agree on the general picture of art in the 20<sup>th</sup> century but let us think beyond this very well-tended teleological garden where progress seems to take command and let us wonder what would be the implications if the context had changed?

In the Britannica [20] online dictionary the what if entry has this remark: "*life is full of what-ifs*". We tend to imagine past realities as the product of self-contained facts, of irreversible events. But we forget what literature has told us for centuries, even when it intends to depict reality in its more obsessive details, that imagination is the gateway where the "what if?" unfolds.

A very relevant contribution of Barrio's muggles and other artworks mentioned throughout the text is the visceral way they present the theme of violence, so vividly that it barely looks like art. It represents a faithful portrait of life and violence experienced not only at that time but in the past and even in the Brazilian present. In Brazil, the population's relationship with naked violence is historical. In some cities, more expressively, as those that top the most dangerous rates, such as Salvador, Fortaleza, Recife, and Manaus, located in

the poorest areas of the country. Barrio's muggles (artwork that doesn't look like art) are timeless traces of the enduring banalization of violence and criminalization of poor, Native-American, and Afro-American people. If in his "Seja marginal, seja herói" (1968) red banner tribute to the petty criminal Alcir Figueira da Silva, Helio Oiticica playfully but critically explores the urban delinquent as a modern hero because like the avant garde artist (and Zola's "L'oeuvre" also comes to mind) or the revolutionary he is doomed by the security status quo; Barrio's Situation experience enhances that life is far more radical and bloody than its idealisation.

In the end, it's essential to highlight the exercise of thinking about history in an alternative way emerged as a fruitful path for methodologies that involve working with contemporary art, a very complex field of Art History, where methods are still being created and are in constant transformation.

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