

## LANCHONETE

### Todd Lester



Over a series of short visits and long stays in São Paulo, Brazil, since 2005, I observed that the *lanchonete* (lunch counter) due to its ubiquitous presence and porous, open-front or open-corner design remains a place where the upper and lower economic classes share middle ground – if only to take a *cafezinho* and *pão de queijo* standing at the same counter – in an otherwise swiftly stratifying and fortifying city.

Lanchonete is a time and site-specific artist residency project, with an underlying focus on alternative economy, modes of exchange and societal witnessing in a neighbourhood in the centre of São Paulo, an area home to economic migrants from across South America and undergoing

rapid gentrification. As Latin American cities go, São Paulo is the big, tough kid on the block. With over 20 million inhabitants, São Paulo, a.k.a. Sampa or *Cidade da Garoa* (City of Drizzle), is perhaps best characterised by its Latin motto *Non ducor, duco*, which translates as “I am not led, I lead”.

Precarity is a term being popularised within the arts community as the state of being dispossessed, with conditions varying from having one's labour disassociated from intellect; exploitative working conditions; alternative collective forms lacking legitimacy; and the deleterious effect of capitalistic fantasies – e.g., zero-sum game, post-fordism, pareto optimality – on livelihood and general security. Influenced by these same conditions, the notion of an artist residency becomes unmoored and stops being the inhabiting of a space for the sake of solidarity on the one hand, and hospitality in the service of nurturing avant-garde ideas on the other... a bilateral agreement between community and guest, and thus a joint aspiration to empower creativity. Similarly, those desirous of mobility may distinguish – and thus exempt – themselves from those for whom the reality of economic migration is levied as a penalty by an opaque system of global capital... a burgeoning contemporary polis, tens of thousands of people who arrive daily as newcomers – termed wretched (Fanon), *homo sacer* (Agamben), subaltern (Spivak) – from zones of conflict or economic crisis to relatively calmer milieus where they achieve ostensible safety while often losing their right to have rights (Arendt) as a consequence.



The project, these images and this text all fall under the title of Lanchonete, but *títulos* are given to books, usually after they are completed. So, to cast Lanchonete as a projection or as a generative vision of the future lowers the scrim of project management and invites a frank analysis of risk-taking and inherent uncertainty.

I recently landed in São Paulo for a week-long research residency



(15-21 October 2012). I use the 'artist residency' moniker to name (and describe) this period as well as the overall Lanchonete project, while also explicitly questioning the role of newcomer artists as temporary, short-term inhabitants, drawn to fast-changing urban communities through similar circumstances as those that hold a tractor beam between me and the centre of São Paulo.





Whereas I am unable to think about artist mobility as anything more or less than a subset of human mobility left unchecked, the notion of 'artist residency' attaches itself to capital (and vice versa) via non-profit funding streams, and thus enters a neoliberal economic vernacular – alongside cultural diplomacy – at the crosshairs

of culture funding and nation-statism. As both trope and meme, artist residency becomes a placebo of artist inclusion that simultaneously downplays the need for deep thinking by artists on critical issues, and the idea that innovation resulting from such critical engagement is the primary justification for artist mobility in the first place.

On the other hand, artists are often instrumentalised through compliance with a deployment mentality of state cultural exchange programmes, which are tantalising (and more easily deflect analysis) in the under-resourced space of artists working for social change, irrespective of national borders and foreign policy agendas.



Lanchonete is a five-year journey that culminates in and around a typical *lanchonete* in the centre of São Paulo. The first half of the project is for creating an administration and documenting the unfolding bureaucratic process of starting a business in Brazil as an outsider, as well as becoming known and building trust in the community in which the restaurant is situated. The first years will be characterised by site prospecting; asking everything in a phenomenological spirit and weaving new inputs into programme design; explaining myself publically until it feels right; and – ultimately – asking to join a community that is not yet my own.

The second half of that period will be running the business (contiguous performance) and the neighbourhood artist residency (series of vignettes) for which the lanchonete is a physical and conceptual anchor... in its design, one performance does not work

without the other. Business as Trojan horse, Lanchonete learns from, plays with and rigorously interrogates the utopic template of artist residency. The *lanchonete* will have a staff and operate as a bottom line-oriented business; international residents will be invited to live in a suite of adjacent apartments for periods of four to six months; local artists and cultural organisers will join the project in other ways. Whereas I will oversee the restaurant as a business, I can only referee artists' engagement with the surrounding community – lightly chalking out parameters for its participants – and in that role, strive to engender an atmosphere in which distinctions between worker and guest, international and local will blur as the project, a time-release capsule, dissolves into the city.

The open call for artists does not seek a film screening within the space of the restaurant nor a traditional exhibition on its walls, but asks artists to engage the vernacular architecture and practices of its environs, and in so doing invite its customers to – or include them in – something new or seeing something old differently... an overlay to quotidian patterns... moving from imagery to imaginary. Some artists will join Lanchonete through a bartering and pre-booking approach, influenced by projects such as New Life Copenhagen, the Homebase Project (NYC) and the Berlin Office,

which has already begun and will gradually populate up to 50 percent of the residency capacity for the period 2015-2017; however the open call for ideas and expressions of interest is as simple as reacting to this text at saopaulolanchonete@gmail.com.

Boiled down, Lanchonete is a constructive critique of the growing/vague-ing residency sector; a contemplation on gentrification as a way of life (one that is related to other ‘-ations’, for e.g. globalisation, brazilianification,<sup>1</sup> commodification); a workplace and station of witness... the panopticon remixed.

\*\*\*

The images used here are from a meandering walk I took through São Paulo's Centro with local photographer, Pedro Marques.

\*\*\*

The kickoff of Lanchonete happened on Saturday, 20 October 2012, with the research and production support of Casa das Caldeiras,<sup>2</sup> through artistic consultation and event production by Ghawazee Coletivo,<sup>3</sup> and was hosted at Pivô<sup>4</sup> at Edifício Copan, the most beautiful building in the world. Follow the Lanchonete from projection to realisation on the Residency Unlimited<sup>5</sup> dialogue platform. ■





## Notes

- 1 Brazilianification is defined as the process by which the middle class disappears, and the gulf between the upper and lower classes widens.
- 2 Casa das Caldeiras is a cultural space in the Matarazzo basin near the centre of São Paulo. <http://www.casadascaldeiras.com.br/> (last accessed 15 February 2013).
- 3 Ghawazee is a transdisciplinary performance action collective made up of women with different artistic backgrounds, which investigates the expressions of the feminine through artistic actions presented in public spaces. The collective is searching for

the creation of an experimental language [and] practice that forges temporary, transgressive disruptions in the order of everyday life through artistic actions, intended mostly for the local, found and unforeseen public. <https://www.facebook.com/ghawaseecoletivo/info> (last accessed 15 February 2013).

4 Pivô is an independent platform dedicated to the investigation of contemporary processes of cultural creation. It intends to promote critical thinking on art, architecture, urbanism, as well as other contemporary manifestations by enticing a dialogue between creators, producers, scholars, students and the general public. Within its set of strategies, Pivô is

contributing to the revitalisation process of downtown São Paulo, with emphasis on the uniqueness of Copan building and its surroundings. <http://www.pivo.org.br/> (last accessed 15 February 2013).

- 5 Residency Unlimited (RU) creates tailored environments of network/technical and logistical support for artists and curators in all disciplines and at all stages of their practice. RU facilitates artists' visions by activating meaningful connections and supporting the realisation of projects on a case-to-case basis. The Lanchonete Dialogue can be found at <http://www.residencyunlimited.org/category/dialogues/lanchonete/> (last accessed 15 February 2013).