

## **Using Art Terms to Refer to Community Organizing**

*Artistic Research, Durational, Platform, Site-Specificity*

*A lunch talk for KTH Architecture School (Stockholm) using the example of Lanchonete.org in São Paulo.*

What I'm doing with the title is attempting to quickly call-out and partially reduce the distinctions that heavy, disciplinary orientation—and related vocabularies—can place on a hybrid practice. I believe that the overlap I'm pointing to will be evident in these notes and our discussion. So, let me first pose the primary question for the talk: What is the role of an urban artistic intervention? Or, another way to ask it: With whom is the intervention in dialogue ... who are the audience-cum-participants?

Let me start with what I think Lanchonete.org is, which is an artist-led, cultural platform focused on how people live and work in, navigate and share the contemporary city with the Center of São Paulo as our outlook. It gets its name from the ubiquitous lunch counters—convivial, fluorescent-lit, open-walled, laborious, points of commerce—that populate almost every street corner. Lanchonete.org is about the issues that big cities face, the different forms of 'urban power', and the *Right to the City*, but not insomuch as to define these constructs...rather to stretch the platform as far as is necessary to consider diverse viewpoints.

What's special about right now? We've been making Lanchonete.org for four years already, and we're at the transition point between its first years as conceptual platform and having our own physical space and community context at Rua Paim 235 to anchor our observations and actions. We're about to start working with a professional evaluator and a team of artist researchers, and allow our project an extra year—2018—to take a deeper look at the networks that have formed through Lanchonete.org and the impact they may have on/at the physical site of the lanchonete. In order to do so, we're creating a regular workshop series with the community, celebrating and experimenting with different forms of creativity and communication over the next two years. The understanding (of the city) by the platform, its five-year duration, as well as its practical, activity-based production approach—creativity workshops, nutrition and food programming, communication and alternative media focus—are all conscious gestures of exchange, openness and seriousness.

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From the introduction of Dialogues in Public Art, discussing the 70s and 80s 'failures of the planning establishment' in New York City, the present Department of Cultural Affairs Commissioner, Tom Finkelpearl (2001) points out that:

Just as architects were demonized as the destroyers of the city, artists were unrealistically asked to salvage it. At some basic level, there was a hope that art

could revive an old idea of the city. It is not so much that people wanted art on their buildings. Rather, they wanted to return to the sort of urban environment that they imagined was present at the time artists were regularly included in architecture. The initial impetus was conservative—a nostalgia for the premodern rather than any sense of the Postmodern. The laws were spawned in an effort to attract people back to the downtown areas that they were abandoning. And, in fact, urban redevelopment is still a primary motivation in many public art programs.

Right after his intro chapter, entitled ‘The City as Site,’ Finkelpearl details a few controversial public art projects, including Richard Serra’s Tilted Arc sculpture that was commissioned by a NYC federal office building and later removed from the site by the same governmental agency, and another when artist, John Ahearn was commissioned by NYC to create three bronze sculptures for a police station in the Bronx—where he lived—that Ahearn later asked to be removed due to community protest. One cannot always discern artistic intention in such urban interventions\*, nor can it be argued that all site-specific artworks—whether material, processual or both—have community organizing as a tacit goal. And, in some cases, the artist might explain his overall approach to goal-setting and utility, such as Thomas Hirschhorn did with *The Spectre of Evaluation*<sup>1</sup>, then refusing to answer much about his intentions on specific art projects, such as The Gramsci Monument in the Bronx, NYC.

*[\*In the above section, I’m conflating somewhat the public art forms of sculpture and site-specific, or rather broadening ‘intervention’ to include them both.]*

Richard Serra’s reaction to the aforementioned 1980s situation—quoted from Andrea Liu essay<sup>2</sup>—was to come up with a set of three tenets that are now widely accepted, which are:

1. Antagonism towards a site is a crucial component of site-specificity;
2. Inseparability: Against the notion of ontologically hermetic, ‘portable’ sculpture that could be circulated and plopped anywhere at any time, oblivious to its context, Serra insisted that site-specific work had to be inseparable from its site;
3. Unrepeatability: Not only against the notion of portability, Serra insisted that site-specific work had to be unrepeatable.

However, some artists offer to explicitly articulate goals—social and otherwise—for their artworks. I am attempting to do that with Lanchonete.org, something I’ll explain a little later on. In an October 2004 essay<sup>3</sup>, Simon Sheikh asserts that “the counter-public is a conscious mirroring of the modalities and institutions of the normative public, but in effort to address … other imaginaries.” There have been numerous moments over the past four years when Lanchonete.org was the platform on which these other social, economic, political and cultural imaginaries became

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<sup>1</sup> [http://www.gladstonegallery.com/sites/default/files/FlashArt\\_2011\\_e.pdf](http://www.gladstonegallery.com/sites/default/files/FlashArt_2011_e.pdf)

<sup>2</sup> *Theorising Art Interventions: Manifesta 6 and Occupy 38*

<sup>3</sup> *Representation, Contestation and Power: The Artist as Public Intellectual*

more familiar to me. And, this is what Lanchonete.org aims to do in the broadest sense. Therefore, it can use these aforementioned tenets of site-specificity as an 'art historical barometer', while also attempting to establish a question or value, such as ours on 'A Right to the City' and offer to get to know deeply the community in which it seeks to learn and do things together. This perhaps assures 'inseparability' in a different way. For this, I'd like to talk about two topics together—intentions and research.

Entering into a relationship with a community is a high-responsibility proposition. This likely no different for the fields of art, architecture, planning and so forth. If one wants to gain trust, then it stands to reason that there is responsibility embedded in the relationships that form over the course of a project. In fact, I find that I can best 'check' my intentions—holding them to some accountability as I may set out in my writing—by setting an end-date for the project. It does not mean that I will stop being involved abruptly at the end of a project, but that by having a milestone, those involved may know when a project will be assessed, modified, transformed, taking on bigger risks, changing leadership, etc. This may differ between different types of participants, as not all new relationships will require official membership to the project in order to flourish. I expect this will be the case with the 25-year manager of the lanchonete, Tarcisio, who is much more interested in milestones laid out by a continued lease and any rent increases he might expect.

I use the word 'platform' to describe the evolving activities and colliding networks that comprise Lanchonete.org. It's a clever word, but what does platform mean? To date, we are 30+ people, including an architect, journalist, radio maker, chef, designer, gardener, a publishing collective, a street artist and videomapper, but to name a few. Together we are developing a methodology via our workshop series. For Lanchonete.org, the goal is to remain an open process for its 5-6 year duration, inviting ideas and projects into the 'mix' until it culminates in various forms feedback, including book on what we learned ... sometime in 2019. Perhaps it is only by looking back at 'what happened' that a platform can be described. And, this is what I mean by 'research'.

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The Modernist 'Treme Treme' (as it is pejoratively called) in which the lanchonete is located is the lone hold-out reflecting the previous economy of the neighborhood on a small, yet very connected, street in the Center; there are seven new high-rise, luxury apartment buildings going up (or already up) on the street; the cumulative 'purchasing power' of the streets' inhabitants is changing drastically/quickly. We have joined forces with at least two other organizations—FICA (Associação pela Propriedade Comunitária) and GastroMotiva, which focuses on nutrition and food justice—to further develop the social and economic aspects of the overall project on Rua Paim with Lanchonete.org.

In early 2015, I listened in on a discussion between University of Leuven students planning the Insurgent Cartography workshop at Hotel Cambridge Occupation and

Raquel Rolnik, FAU-USP professor and former UN Special Rapporteur on Adequate Housing in which she observed the pronounced role of cultural agents as a newer development in the housing and public space movements of São Paulo. Nazaré Brasil, who manages the São João Cultural Center, once told me that collaboration with international artists and cultural producers lends credibility to their approach and use of cultural strategy to 'build a bridge' between people who came to the center when it still had abandoned buildings seeking convenience and those who now 'come down from Paulista' and often hold negative impressions of occupiers, ethnic enclaves, informal groups and low rent payers. By explaining their strategy she helped Lanchonete.org find its 'footing' in São Paulo's urban issue landscape, and through repeat partnership, co-curating artist residencies and public programmes, we have slowly developed a mutually beneficial relationship between our projects.

It is important to acknowledge others who have attempted similarly irregular projects, such as Nelson Brissac Peixoto's *arte/cidade*<sup>4</sup>, BaixoCentro, Ocupeacidade<sup>5</sup> and others, as well as the impact of mainstream cultural production and usage, which can be effectuated by longer hours on the Minhocão, more bike lanes and accessibility in the Center (under Haddad) and even the street party scene as discussed in this crassly named article, *Reclaiming the Jungle*<sup>6</sup>. I excerpt one of my favorite references, however from the publication *Extradisciplinary Spaces and Dedisiclinizing Moments: In and out of the 30th São Paulo Biennial* (2013):

One of the first meetings between the original members of Equipe3—Francisco Iñarra, Genilson Soares and Lydia Okumura—took place in the context of a collective proposal, the performance 'Lanchonarte', centered on the idea of 'art as food for consumption' and Offered to the Museum of Modern Art of Rio de Janeiro in 1970. The proposal was rejected, but it ended up being expanded in the Hall of Contemporary Art of Santo André in 1971, with the title of 'Restaurarte'.

Since beginning the Lanchonete.org project, I've become friends with Genilson Soares and Lydia Okumura, the two surviving members of Equipe3.

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<sup>4</sup> <http://www.artecidade.org.br>

<sup>5</sup> <http://popupcity.net/brazilian-situationism/>

<sup>6</sup> <http://www.brasilwire.com/reclaiming-the-jungle/>