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Art Collectives and the Prestes Maia Occupation in São Paulo (plus post-script)¹

Gavin Adams

The text below seeks to sketch out a few ideas about artistic collaborative practices in the context of art collectives work with the São Paulo Housing Movement, focusing on the work developed around the Prestes Maia Occupation in São Paulo.

The idea is to review some of the artistic actions developed by the São Paulo art collectives (December 2004 to December 2006)² so as to contribute to the formation of a shared vocabulary of resistance and autonomy, as well as to examine some of the deadlocks, difficulties and achievements found in the course of this search. This text benefits from the hindsight of many years, but develops perceptions and intuitions that have originated then.

I seek to examine the scenario composed, on the one hand, of an unstable cloud of artists, educators, lawyers, cinema buffs and assorted supporters. On the other hand, the complex phenomenon of the housing rights movement, and in particular its equally multifaceted embodiment: the Prestes Maia squat. Within this complexity, the point of this text is to approach the issue in the following manner: in what way have collective and collaborative practices been mobilised in the relationship with the housing movement?

¹ This is an abridged version of the text *Arte e coletivos na ocupação Prestes Maia*, originally written in Portuguese and circulated in Brazil, having appeared in various electronic publications (including the defunct Documenta 12 magazines) from January 2007.

² Prestes Maia occupation was deactivated and emptied out on June 15, 2007. It has been recently (November 2010) re-occupied.

Warning and procedure

It is important at this point to state that I am not a theoretician and that I have formed my point of view as an artist involved in many of the processes to which I refer. This is more evident in the few bibliographic references I quote – certainly more numerous and more relevant texts can be indicated. Thus, the strictly theoretical paths will have to be better outlined in other occasions, perhaps by other hands.

Another warning regards the absence of artist's or collectives' names linked to specific artwork in this text, which is intentional. I am aware that this tactic hinders the more ready verification of the points I raise along the text, and that this absence impoverishes the text for the researcher who seeks to know more about the events or collectives involved³. However, the expected gain with this procedure is the minimisation of the internalisation of the validating, legitimating and cataloguing work of the curator-gatherer, who formats narratives so as to aggregate value to his or her brand name as author-critic. The logic of the signature or of the brand-name is a crucial stage in the appropriation processes, as I hope is explained further into the text. Possibly naive, the tactics adopted seeks to illuminate this text (and also the reader) as full participants in the process I describe – in short, you and I are also players on this board, as we formulate opinions regarding the occupation and collectives from the interpretation of records and memories. Equally, I have avoided dealing with the unbalancing power of the visual record, particularly where images do not distinguish qualities of engagement, as will be related below.

Finally, the history of the relationship between the São Paulo housing movement with the constellation of supporters that includes the art collectives is still to be written, and it is not the intention of this text to do so or even to start it. Only the profusion of accounts may do justice to the diversity of experiences. This article, therefore, presents a necessarily partial, reductionistic and excluding point of view.

³ Perhaps the best surviving site for information and documents is: <http://integracaoemposse.zip.net/>

Initial points

A few suppositions ground this text. The first one seeks to meet the question: “why form a collective at all?” The possible answers are countless and varied, perhaps as numerous as the collectives themselves. The answers I select for my argument and practice include: the collective format facilitates the production of the common and its public instead of private appropriation; it facilitates the exchange of resistance and autonomy strategies and tactics with other actors in real time; it increases the reach of poetic and affective tools for relationship with other subjectivities and groups; it carries out a shared and free cartography of the city, of power, of alliances and of artistic practices.

I have selected the experimental theoretical point of collaboration, without however developing it properly, in order to raise a few relevant points regarding collectives practices, especially that of the production of value and its appropriation. This discussion does not find a place in the terms normally associated to urban intervention, for instance. I do not have the competence to carry out a complete discussion, but I will instead present a few simple points that compose the universe within which I believe art collectives work.

Indeed, there is today a wide debate that considers different forms of relationship and production within art, largely in the wake of the discussions around the frontiers between audience and author/artist. This discussion tries to make distinctions between ideas such as participation, interactivity, collaboration etc. The 2006 São Paulo Biennale propitiated a surge in this debate, since its theme – “how to live together” – invited precisely this kind of issue. Some of the protagonists of this debate include Gregory Sholette, Suzanne Lacy, Claire Bishop, Nicholas Borriaud, Lucy Lippard, Christian Kravagna and Grant Kester. I have borrowed a few ideas from Kester, including a brief classification of types of collaboration. Kester’s argument is a lot more sophisticated than suggested by the present text, but it will serve nevertheless as a starting point for my discussion.

Kester distinguishes three degrees of collaboration: the other as an extra, as a coadjutant and as a co-producer. This was my way of introducing the more complex discussion proposed by Kester, who focuses on the issues involved in relational art regarding the second and third types.

The collaborative practice where the other – individual, community, movement or situation – is in this context an anonymous face that only does figuration for an event or action, adding “local colour” to an action or artwork. The second collaboration type – the supporting role – seeks to establish some exchange with the place and with the people involved, as part of the work, but ends up restricting productive collaboration to the event or experience that is then documented, authored, and later circulated/traded in art circuit as an authorial object. The value building process is continued by means of its circulation – that is, of the record or index – in art markets, now completely severed from the supporter’ context. The third collaboration type seeks to understand the other as co-producer (work together in collaboration, co-labour) and the authorship of the work belongs to all. The record of the process would then cease to be an independent outside product onto which the action converges.

The point is not to metrify a moral scale where the highest points are awarded to collectives most kindly treating “the other”. Instead, the central question is how can the creative anarchic energy of the collective be harnessed in the contact with social movements? How can this contact yield elements for action in a scenario of crisis in traditional political stances – party, union, elections etc.? How can the poetic field of social conflict be explored by the sharing of experiences in a range wider than art content? Can any of the strategies deployed in the art scene actually be useful in the streets? How can art collectives end up reproducing, inadvertently or not, the very conditions it was meant to defuse? What role exactly have art collectives played?

A wider context is familiar to us through neo-liberal economics, which has encouraged artists to cease to make objects and become service providers, in consonance with the rest of society. The point of this simplistic description of an aspect of labour relations within the field of art is that, given the general character of the flexibilisation of work, we artists also reproduce

this logic in the process of carrying out our own artwork. This view is hegemonic in São Paulo art schools since the 1990's.

This would help to explain how certain art collectives are able to traffic value from collaboration into private appropriation, sometimes acting on both sides of the gentrification battles, for instance. Brand-name feeds on this traffic, since the content of the events or actions matter less in the valuing of the band-name with street cred. Thus, the prestige gained in the street can be sold in the gallery or in the design or advertising agency. That the designer, advertising professional or even individual artist would participate in this process of appropriation and render it possible seems very predictable, since it is this precisely what defines their professions. My point is that an art collective that hopes to speak of resistance or alternatives to the market forms needs to consider its very condition as collaborative producer. I hope to bring attention to the fact that this type of relationship does not depend on the artist's intentions or disposition, but it is a structural organisation logic of artistic production – that can be challenged.

Authority/collaboration

My main point is that the São Paulo art collectives working around Prestes Maia have suffered, in general, of a lack of understanding about our role in the production of the Common and of our position within the productive chain of art. A lack of clarity regarding our very constitution (business or collective?) has led to the reproduction in various degrees of expropriating relationships. This confusion allows same business-collective to simultaneously act in the production of pop and anti-pop discourses.

From the start, the diversity of the Prestes Maia occupation forced an opening regarding collaboration. It was a whole universe of people concentrated inside a single building, organised into countless to-be-discovered combinations: formal and informal workers, unemployed, mothers, youngsters, children, refuse pickers, bearing infinite stories and personal, professional and spiritual itineraries. It is worth mentioning that artists and

collaborators did not feature a central forum or direction, and that they included a variety of professions, occupations, attitudes, backgrounds and ideologies, though in our crushing majority were middle-class and did not dwell downtown.

São Paulo city-centre is the stage for a fierce territorial struggle. The housing movements are in the frontline of the gentrification for higher incomes battle. In very simple terms, gentrification involves the degradation of the central area so that private enterprises – mostly property owners – can demand from the state investments to hike up the value of property and of present or future businesses, be it in the direct form of urban reforms, be it in the form of tax rebates. This means that low-income families, such as the homeless or informal and semi-formal workers who already live in the city centre and form a vibrant community, need to be removed and reallocated to the outskirts. Prestes Maia occupation is close to the Luz transport complex, a node for train and underground railways, which enormously increases its pecuniary value and increases pressures for its eviction. The gentrification process of the central area is in full swing, with the diminution of pedestrian areas, removal of street populations, the substitution of informal street vendors by fixed newsstands etc.⁴

In this sense, it was my opinion that the meeting with Prestes Maia occupation constituted a golden opportunity for the inversion of the process that normally rewards artists called up to add value to gentrified or under gentrification spaces. This summons usually takes the shape of exhibitions, shows or any activity of entertainment or art that may add value to the lifestyle now hoped to be associated with the city centre, so as to attract higher income buyers and consumers, who do not presently live downtown. As part of the “recuperation”, nearly always a cultural centre is offered, to meet the demands of a de-luxe consumption at the same time as it serves for the carrying out of so-called educational and “social responsibility” activities – typically performed by artists, or, more strictly speaking, creative workers providing generic educational, entertainment, art and ‘citizenship’ services.

Many forces and groups struggle for housing rights in downtown São Paulo. They are known in Brazil as the “roofless” (*sem-teto*). The Prestes Maia occupation was a squatted building, the

⁴ *Fórum Centro Vivo* has published a complete dossier about the processes underway downtown: <http://dossie.centrovivo.org/Main/HomePage>

largest vertical squat in Latin America. It was occupied by an organised homeless movement (MTSTC), and was one of many such initiatives. What I call *São Paulo collectives* are those art collectives that have participated in one or more activities developed in the context of the housing movement, in particular around Prestes Maia. These collectives do not by a far shot constitute the totality of the city's art collectives.

This diversity seems to have invited a variety of approximations: some artists sought the squatters in general, others the central coordination, others the opinion formers, the women, the young, the families, the children, the collective instances within the building or the library... In their turn, these approximations have generated a wide range of results, artistic and human.

Many of the art collectives and artists had just begun a process of self-recognition, in the wake of the ACMSTC show (2003), followed by *Reverberações* in 2004, promoted by the CORO network (and also the discussions around the Canadian publication *Parachute*). A large section of the future supporters of Prestes Maia rehearsed the potency of possible common action in these reflection and exchange events. To be able to carry out work at Prestes Maia, right at the heart of São Paulo, in dialogue with an organised and active movement, seemed to be an opportunity to intervene in a scale and degree totally outside the scope of the art circuits and its concerns. No cultural centre, gallery or regular institution could offer a 22-floor human volcano, self-organised and free from drug trafficking or pimping.

The conditions under which the meeting took place also help in the understanding of the relationship of the collectives with the housing movement: the imminence of eviction and the precariousness of the situation then experienced by the movement, regarding both Prestes Maia and other occupations (which were indeed evicted, such as Plínio Ramos occupation in 2005). The movement's demands regarding its immediate survival have privileged a kind of association that seems to have yielded the most concrete and visible results.

This collaboration can be expressed in various ways: increase in the political visibility of the movement in the media; increase in the potency of political presence in the streets; formation of a protective ring of collaborators around Prestes Maia.

The imminence of the eviction has contributed to the fact that the struggle against the invisibilisation and criminalisation of the housing movement was foregrounded. In other words, it was necessary to increase the political cost of the eviction, and “take the movement from the crime section and bring it into the culture supplement”, as it was then said. This task started with the mobilization of the instruments already available to the artists: contact networks in the media and other opinion forming spheres. A series of activities, related to art or not, were carried out in the context of the movement and inside the Prestes Maia building. The first event in the approximation between the occupation and the artists groups, which preceded the later involvement, was the exhibition/event called ACMSTC (December 2003). A whole range of experiences was then carried out, ranging from a hotel set up with the squatters inside the building to pictures simply hung on walls with no further elaboration⁵. In terms of visibility, this meeting seemed to build the first socially visible manifestation of the association artists/housing movement outside the discursive circuit to which the social housing movements – and also the artists in their own circuits – are normally confined to. However, the visibility in fact achieved had a somewhat ambiguous character, if one takes into account that possibly the only big media space given to the event was in Mônica Bérghamo’s gossip column (*Folha de São Paulo* newspaper, December 14, 2003). Notwithstanding, a strong affective and political bond between the occupation and a cloud of people did shape up in a variety of degrees and practices, irradiating in many directions the lived experiences propitiated by the event, inaugurating future developments.

A certain breathing period after ACMST seems to have been needed for the experience to be digested by all, both by the occupation and by the visitors. The meeting was not free of contradictions and estrangements from both sides. Some of the tension points I more vividly recall are the disagreements regarding the workings of the occupation’s internal power instances (who decides who will or will not live in the building) and the degree of personal freedom claimed by the artist regarding the exhibition space or the use of drugs. Despite that, many bonds then forged continued to bear fruit on the form of more or less sporadic contacts, more by individual initiative than on the level of collectives.

⁵ A relatively complete list of ACMSTC participants can be found at (bear in mind that it was compiled before the event): <http://br.groups.yahoo.com/group/corocoletivo/message/5>.

A new eviction threat brings about a fresh mobilisation of new and previous supporters: *Reintegração de Posse x Integração sem Posse*⁶ (July and August 2005). A series of activities, workshops, shows and presentations were planned for the building, specially on Saturdays, so the it was possible to dialogue and interact with the squatters and the movement, at the same time as it we sought simply to be there and develop some kind of work that could spark media interest. Great efforts were made to achieve media insertion, which in general showed little interest, with no “journalistic fact” to report.

This collaboration in the construction of political visibility continued in other instances, such as with the collaboration with the Front that brings together downtown housing movements, the FLM (Housing Struggle Front). Joint activities were proposed there so as to increase the potency of the demonstrations or protests, as it was the case of the demonstration in front of the São Paulo Law Courts (*Fórum*), on August 8, 2005. In this opportunity, T-shirts were printed with a single letter, which, when worn by people standing side by side, read phrases relevant to the protest. Another similar event was the blockade of Avenida Prestes Maia (February 7 2006), carried out by the occupation; the presence of artists was noted, increasing the political visibility of the occupation.

Many other forms of collaboration and struggle were carried out in the course of the process as a whole. The *Escracho*, for instance, was a manner of rendering visible some of the cogs in the gentrification system (October 29, 2005). Inspired in the Argentinean *escraches*, which sought to revert the invisibility of torturers and active figures in the past dictatorship, the fun outing took squatters and supporters to the sub-Mayor’s house, Andrea Matarazzo, in the wealthy neighbourhood of Morumbi. This free occupation of public space and open denunciation played on the logic of exclusion and thus opened up poetic possibilities, besides identifying the characters behind the administrative machine operating gentrification.

The event that seems to have more clearly concentrated the strategies described above, in my understanding, was the eviction of the Plínio Ramos occupation. The municipal authorities set

⁶ This would read something like *Repossession x Integration without Property*

the eviction of this occupation for August 16, 2005, and the movement decided to stay inside. They locked themselves in and waited for the police to arrive. The place had been previously 'prepared' for the police arrival, both in the placing of banners and posters on the building's façade and in the shape of a stage that included the giant word DIGNITY, written on real estate advertising street placards captured days before and placed before the building⁷. Thus, the police force was forced to fall into visual traps, as the photographers present at the eviction, media or supporters, were able to record the dissembling of a fundamental right of the human being by the police, in the shape of unwitting performance participation. It was a way of projecting an image of the movement into the world of journalistic images, using the existing images circulation structure. The placards were later appropriated by Prestes Maia occupation and worked as a kind of protective outdoor barrier. Besides, the presence of artists and supporters inside the building, together with the squatters, has allowed for the generation of images and inside witnesses, revealing a phase of the eviction that does not normally gain visibility and when serious police violence often takes place (as it did).

The violent eviction has resulted in intense visibility for the housing movement, which, despite the high human cost, managed to increase the political onus of future evictions, perhaps halting Prestes Maia's⁸. The images circulated worldwide in the Internet, generating international repercussions. After the eviction, a 'funeral cortège' walked the street of São Paulo in protest, in extension to the poetic clash around this occupation. This may have been the first significant puncture in the media discourse, who claimed there was no "journalistic fact" fit for publication. An important 'journalistic fact' unrelated to violence later materialized in the form of the Prestes Maia library, which found great echo and interest from the media.

The described collaborations between the collectives and the movement seem to have been little problematic, since the urgency of the support allowed for the convergence of the movement's immediate survival with an already established practices menu brought in by the artists, which I describe generically as expertise in the building and circulation of symbols.

⁷ The work with the real estate placards had been initiated in the SPLAC event, promoted by EIA.

⁸ As it would have been later related to the Prestes Maia coordinators by the police battalion commander.

The point I develop below is that, if on the one hand the association artist/housing movement has produced positive and palpable results in the form of the crucial increase in visibility and in the widening of the poetic range of urban actions, thus contributing for the survival at least of Prestes Maia and for its present situation of relative political and legal stability⁹, on the other hand, this very association has failed in capitalizing and deepening the more radical meanings of collaboration – and thus enrich the poetic widening of the encounter.

If we retake here the issue of collaboration within collective practices as facilitator for the exchange of resistance and autonomy strategies and practices with other social actors in real time, we can study the forms of collaboration and authoration that have emerged in the contact with artists, notably collectives, and the movement.

My point is very simple: the art collectives, taken in their generality, did not know how to take advantage of the potential of the situation presented by the Prestes Maia Occupation, due to the collectives' low political awareness, their lack of internal collective practices, low capacity for listening and weakness before more savvy managers.

I think that this was apparent in the attempts to organise and keep more stable workshops that would spark interest in the squatters, but it was equally present in other situations. The general attitude seemed to be based on the idea that we had something to teach and them something to learn, ranging from skills such as drawings up to glass blowing. Even when a change in this logic was attempted, that is, when classes were to be given by squatters, there seems not to have been sufficient interest from the artists. I think that the difficulty in propitiating the active participation of the squatters in the Saturday and others activities (that were less urgent and hurriedly carried out than the street demos or blockades) is related to the disparity of expectations generated by the collectives' low capacity for listening, on the one hand, and to the difficulty of these art groups to find something recordable for circulation in art market environments.

⁹ December 2006.

Even in the visibility enhancing actions, such as in the FLM (Housing Struggle Front)'s demo in front of the São Paulo Courts (August 2005), it was possible to see an important approach difference. Two T-shirt groups were mobilised, both bearing a single letter that, side by side with the others, read a sentence of great physical presence: one group of T-shirts was brought over by an art collective, result of an action previously carried out in another context, bearing the words *social justice*. Another group of T-shirts had been brought over by the different occupations and formed the sentence *yes to housing, no to exclusion*. The second phrase had been arrived at in a collective session in the Prestes Maia occupation with artists. It is important to state that the aesthetic quality of one or of the other (if one was 'more art' than the other) is not discussed here, nor its legitimacy – if one action was more legitimate than the other. I wish to bring to attention two diverse tactics that have understood collaboration in different ways. These two actions seemed to indicate that the idea of urban intervention or of symbol-making does not necessarily include the idea of collaboration, or at least they place it on another level (the sharing of a stage, for instance).

The confusion around the very productive nature of the collective (enterprise or collective?) seems to have driven the collectives to the open-air art event called *Virada Cultural*.

Virada Cultural was promoted by the City Hall administration of the then mayor José Serra and Gilberto Kassab. It is a series of shows and art events that take place in the period of 24 hours, chiefly downtown. It is inspired in Paris' *Nuit Blanche*. A decree had called artists to submit proposals, which then received funding for its carrying out (alongside music performances, which formed the majority of the night's events).

The entertainment character of this event was very clear in its two editions (2005 and 2006), and one explicit aim was of attracting a middle class audience to the city centre (people who do not normally go downtown). The role of this event within the gentrification process seems crystal clear: the preparation of the city centre a stage for cultural consumption, a kind of rehearsal for the "recovery" proposed by public administration. Proof is the social cleansing in the form of the physical removal of local street populations for the carrying out of the event. The City Hall, indeed, was able to instrumentalise the success of the event as a victory of the

common citizen against the then recent and alarming PCC (a powerful drug cartel that staged a state-wide penitentiary uprising, shutting the whole city down for several hours) attacks, as attested by the headlines “Virada Cultural is society’s answer to violence” (*Viva o Centro* newspaper, 22 May, 2006) and “Peace, the city’s answer to terrorism” (*O Diário do Comércio* newspaper, same date). Besides, it was able to accumulate political gain for the carrying out of the gentrification of the city centre, as recorded by the Rio de Janeiro periodical *Eventos e Mercado* (24 May, 2006): “São Paulo Turismo (*SP Turis*)’s president, Caio Luiz de Carvalho, has stressed that the fusion of culture with tourism is the best way for the capital to find its tourist identity”¹⁰.

A few collectives that developed activities at the Prestes Maia occupation participated in the *Virada Cultural* with actions. In my understanding, this was a crass political mistake that has diminished the potency of the artwork within the city and with the social movement. The lack of clarity regarding the role of art in the gentrification process and regarding the position of the art collectives within the art production chain has led to the easy cooptation of the work into a supposed consensus around the City Hall’s security policy, besides the degradation of the quality of the eventual collaboration involved in some actions or art work, since the territory where such actions took place had been previously cleansed.

Two other significant events that will not be analysed here are the Prestes Maia Library and the Prestes Maia Free School. The latter was a project elaborated so as to bring together the art and educational initiatives around the occupation, an attempt to render them viable as a middle and long-term process. The Library, in its turn, was organized by Severino, a squatter at Prestes Maia, from books collected in his work as a picker. The Library has found favourable echo in the Press and has attracted great media attention. An analysis of these phenomena will have to be carried out some other time, despite its importance in the occupation’s history.

¹⁰ A good compilation of Press reactions can be read, in Portuguese, at the *Virada Cultural* official site: <http://www.viradacultural.com.br/index.php?i=11&nid=180>.

Final thoughts

As a final reflection, I would like to say that I do not seek to diminish the experience of the approximation with social movements, nor its practices or results. I believe that the experiences that I have seen or lived, or of which I had news of, point to interesting forms and practices. They are needed in the construction of cartographies that depend on collaborative forms of elaboration— such as the cartography of power relations, of affections and of labour under capitalism today, or the problems of representation, so urgent to art collectives.

It is true that some of the issues I have brought up, such as the issue of authoration or even the private appropriation of collaborative practices in the form of video record (or indeed of artwork) open up fresh problems. Among them, the problem of the record: is all record expropriative? Does all record need to be collaborative? How would it be possible to record or circulate work without the appropriation of the common? Does a truly collective process yield in a truly collective result? Does it have to?

Far from having an answer to such questions, which are part of a heated debate, the problems thus posed at least reallocate some issues that normally go without consideration: that the circulation of an artwork is part of its valuing process; that the role of the curator as a middle manager in this process is crucial; that the negotiation of collaboration processes in non-exploitative terms must be part of the equation for art collectives.

The most visible gain is, however, seems to be the transfer of issues into the realm of the artist's role within the art food chain. In other words, what we seem to experiment is the emergence of our new condition and the understanding that we artists are also a social movement.

The constitution of the public space as a space of struggle and poetic creation is given less by the formulation of the correct specific symbol than by the opening of freedom within this space, without the need of the symbol specialist – the artist –to be the single author. *We are all authors – we all hold authority.*

In terms of the increase in the political cost of the eviction, we have managed to elevate it to the point in which then (December 2006) the negotiations for the building's recuperation and use for housing purpose mobilised federal echelons, and the permanence of the movement is guaranteed, at least in the months ahead. Furthermore, a wider circle of supporters was created, relieving the initial group, composed mostly by artists, from the survival tasks. Our own maturing as collectives working side-by-side can be credited, at least in part, to the experiences around Prestes Maia. But it is difficult to ignore the fact that the art collectives did not know how to take advantage of the occupation's potential, I believe due to their low politicisation and to the lack of internal collective practices in these groups, as well as the lack of a more political understanding of the housing issues in terms of gentrification, and also their own situation within the arts productive chain.

Symptoms of the little use of collaborative processes and of the organisational deficit of the collectives can be detected not only in the difficulty that the artists have in mobilising the squatters, but also in the little effect we seem to have had in the promotion of internal democracy. In other words, we have failed to multiply the power foci within the occupation and encourage autonomy as a personal political practice, balancing out the highly centralized power within the occupation. Indeed, the occupation's pyramid-like power hierarchy, which apex is above the visible female leaders, can be perceived in the easy instrumentalisation of the occupation by the electoral apparatus of the PT (Workers Party, presently in government with president Lula and president-elect Dilma Rousseff), which in its new phase sees no problem in the illegal vote corralling¹¹ inside the building. These power practices hinder the search for autonomy and go against the libertarian spirit that I see around the collectives, and end up degrading the quality of collaborative exchanges. Besides, I think it is curiously symptomatic that we have not been able to obtain public or private funding for the activities developed inside Prestes Maia. None of the contacts, institutions or corporations with which we normally work has managed, for some reason, to be mobilised in the construction of artwork inside the occupation.

¹¹ Providing favours such as transport to poll stations in exchange for votes.

A way of initiating a reflection around the collaborative art practices in the context of the meeting of the art collectives with the housing movements could begin with the question: what did we learn with Prestes Maia occupation? What did they teach us? This could open a conceptual crevice for our evaluation and learning.

São Paulo, December 2006

POST-SCRIPT

Several years have passed since the events related in this text. Some issues have gained in clarity, others seem to have faded somewhat in importance. The more general issue, however, that of the encounter between art and social movement, seems to burn on.

The very central point seems to hold and persist: somehow artists tend to see themselves as specialists providing a service, and not as a social movement themselves, thus impoverishing contact with other social forces and resulting poetic potency. As we speak, activities collectively developed in Prestes Maia as free or 'authorless' are now signed pieces in the very shamans-turned-curators' portfolios. Also, further readings revealed that the issue of the manager and managerial practices has been better discussed by, for instance, General issues of strategy and tactics have been discussed in many forums, including for instance Gregory Scholette's "dark matter" of the world of art, and the distinction between "thinkers" and "makers". Precarious labour in a corporate landscape, however, is very much the norm among artists and squatters alike.

As for the squatters' movement, it is still battling on. Despite the many continued initiatives by the City Hall to gentrify and "reoccupy" the city centre (among them many demolitions and evictions), Brazilian poverty and destitution seem to be "winning" (specifically downtown. The unabated march of speculation crushes its way around the city as a whole). Municipal and state administrations have up to now failed to shore up the private resources to significantly

'clean' the area, so the basic equation remains the same: vacant property amidst a multitude of homeless people. Along neoliberal lines, there is still no public housing policy as such, (for many years the municipal housing secretary was the president of the Real Estate Operators' union!). The slow burning 'cold war' rages on. I was told by the cooperative of '*catadores*' (pickers who collect rubbish around town and recycle it, often using handcarts) that cleansing assassination of street people is still carried out by real estate enterprises.

So in general the housing movements have a lot of scope for activity, on the one hand, but on the other there has been no move from the market-based deadlock that positively exclude them from the area. As I detail below, there seems to be no public provision of any kind for low- or no-income families. The maximum the Brazilian state can deliver on any level is credit for what for us is a middle-class income (some \$700 US dollars per month). So there is a black hole into which much energy is sucked in, and, one have to say, a kind of complicity of housing movement leaders in this.

Prestes Maia occupation ended in a somewhat anticlimactic manner. Leaders and dwellers reported increasing erosion of internal life and general exhaustion with the precarious situation. Participation in collective instances declined towards the end, with increase in reports of insider violent behaviour. So a deal was reached with the City Hall to vacate the building, at the same time as a weak but clear commitment from the federal government secured three buildings to be repaired and offered for rent. The Mayor himself came into Prestes Maia to announce the deal, along with the Press, and was somewhat surprisingly cheered by the dwellers present.

The deal consisted of three choices: a flat in a very distant housing estate in the outskirts of Sao Paulo; a small monthly rent stipend for those choosing to wait for the federal buildings to be refurbished; a letter of credit from the city Hall that allowed one to borrow money to buy a house or flat.

The housing estate turned out to be of very difficult access and in very poor material conditions. Access to the city centre is difficult and time-consuming. The stipend was cut after a few months, and, to my knowledge, only one of the buildings was actually refurbished.

As for the letter of credit, it did allow many dwellers to buy a place of their own, but it remains to be seen if they will be able keep the instalments up. Hopefully the upturn of the economy will hold their jobs for the necessary time. But I suspect this solution was possible only in the context of heavy subpriming. And no-income families are excluded from this alternative.

Between the vacating of Prestes Maia and today, there have been many other occupations, smaller in size. The main strategy is unchanged: create a de-facto situation with an occupation and then bargain for the best possible deal. Police brutality and impunity is still the norm. Prestes Maia itself was partially re-occupied, and this time artists are actually living in the building, a very positive development that the previous creators were not able to carry out. I have no contact with them as yet, hopefully they have been able to break a few deadlocks.

As pointed out in the main text, the many positive aspects of the Prestes Maia experience include the sheer upholding of a 2 thousand-strong occupation in the middle of Sao Paulo. The expansion move towards society as a whole, the library, and the explosive possibilities derived from breaking social divides and meeting people in a context of struggle, genuinely fresh spaces to deploy poetic sensibilities within spaces where alternatives ways of being together could be tried out. The scope and scale allowed for by this kind of encounter is very big, especially as one realises that the process of precarisation of life is the very model for the arts too. Negative aspects include the authoritarianism and corruption within the movements themselves, fragmentation of the struggle as a whole, the unaccounted destitute people who make up a sizeable contingent of the movement but who will by definition not enjoy any results, the ambiguity of the symbiosis between social movement/political party/municipal administration (the lawyer and kind of shadow leader of Prestes Maia is also owner of the catering contractor that runs the few municipal homeless short-term shelters, whence the Prestes Maia leadership and others drew salaries. He is also a member of the Workers Party – which is in the opposition on city-level, but in office at federal level). Another important aspect

to consider is that the housing movement's partial successes contribute to its own disarticulation, as those who get a home cease to contribute. In other words, contrary to the rural landless movement MST, which struggles for a means of production (workable land), the squatters struggle for private ownership.

A few final words on the widest relevant scope. For a number of reasons, Brazil was hit relatively lightly by the financial crisis. The anti-neoliberal move of having the State to flood the economy with credit when the private bankers recoiled was key to the process, as well as directly fomenting production and consumption. This was a significant U-turn regarding past administrations, and in tune with the global collapse of neoliberal policies. But on the other hand the economic upturn is based on credit, and it seems to be modelled in the very American system that eroded so spectacularly. The money effectively lent to Prestes Maia dwellers to buy property is burdened with the one of the highest interest rates in the world. To have poverty generate money (subpriming) is an astonishing but perverse trick. A second relevant point is that of the Universal Wage (*Bolsa Familia*). Lula's government has provided what amounts roughly to a minimal survival income to all. There are many benefits involved, such as raising millions of above the poverty line. But, in the same throw that has eroded traditional local landlord politics (as the benefit is given directly to the individual and not filtered through the usual administrative channels), it has also weakened social movements in general (especially the rural landless movement MST).

So the final picture seems to indicate that seeking other forces in society and striking working relationships is both necessary and liberating. There is ample room for creative experiences and probing in the context of social struggle, a very wide human continent of various and radical life experiences willing to meet creation and engage in mutual learning. It is my belief that artistic practices are especially well positioned to participate in social struggles, cutting across areas often not even considered by movements and probing that elusive field in which moves the contemporary political subject/agent. New forms of open organisation and mobilisation can be tested out in various forms, often against ingrained formats.

On the down side, organisation within social movements in general still seems to be an endless task, always beginning from scratch, precarious and often easy prey of anyone who can offer minimal structure, such as political parties, authoritarian leaders or state bureaucrats. There is a vibrant energy in social movements, and veritable miracles of the human will to live together, but fragmentation prevails in the face of economic centrifugal pull. To open up autonomous spaces and operate network politics in this field can be very difficult. Visionary horizons often cut little ice on the ground. One is often unwittingly playing into somebody else's dubious interest. It may be just the labour pains of network politics, as social networks attract the attention of its very antipodes: political parties, businesses etc. Precariousness is a massive obstacle. Access to the internet, for instance, is far from universal.