

The Prestes Maia Occupation: Creative *Dissensus* For Social Transformation

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*On the morning of the first eviction
they carried out the wishes of the landlord and his son
furniture's out on the sidewalk next to the family that little piggie went to market,
So they're kicking out everyone
talking about process and dismissal forced removal of the people
on the corner shelter and location
everybody wants somewhere
the elected are such willing partners
look who's buying all their tickets to the game
development wants, development gets
it's official
development wants this neighbourhood
gone so the city just wants the same talking about process and dismissal
forced removal of the people on the corner shelter and location
everybody wants somewhere
everybody wants somewhere*

Fugazi –“Cashout” (2001)

The story of the Prestes Maia occupation began in November 2002 when the City Centre Homeless Movement [Movimento Sem-Teto do Centro (MSTC)]¹ squatted a building in downtown São Paulo. When the main entrance door to the Prestes Maia was finally sealed by the City Administration in June 2007 the occupation was not only hitting the pages of mainstream newspapers and television screens but also galleries and art exhibitions around the world. How did this happen? The Prestes Maia occupation reveals how important linkages can be established between interventionist artistic practices and the squatting movement. These links were forged in an extremely conflictual context where the dwellers of the biggest Latin

American vertical squat lived with daily threats of forced eviction and police violence.

In December 2003 an exhibition called *Contemporary Art in the City Centre Squatters Movement* was held inside the occupation itself involving over 120 artists including many São Paulo art collectives such as BijaRi, Catadores de Histórias, Cia Cachorra, Coletivo Dragão da Gravura, Espaço Coringa, Experiência Imersiva Ambiental, Elefante, Esqueleto Coletivo, Frente 3 de Fevereiro, Nova Pasta and Tranca Rua. After this exhibition these art collectives started to direct part of their actions and projects towards the São Paulo city centre.

São Paulo is a contradictory city where slums, derelict buildings, homeless people, street vendors and squatters share an urban context undergoing a



ZUMBI
SOMOS
NÓS

46 FAMÍLIAS

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process of revitalisation. This process of revitalisation is polarised between the recuperation of the central region in order to render it more attractive to the middle-classes on the one hand, and, on the other, the pressure for an inclusive environment where low income people can benefit from new housing initiatives, income-generation public programmes and jobs.

“Gentrification” and “struggle for housing” have become common expressions in the discourse of the art collectives involved in the Prestes Maia occupation. These collectives sought not only to make known the history and cultural initiatives of those who lived there (such as the 16 thousand-volume library created by one of the squatters) but to also question the region’s production of the physical, social and economic space.

The term “Arid Poetry Zone” has been used to describe how art collectives sought to contribute to the daily life of a place existing under the constant pressure of state violence and brutalisation. The aesthetic vocabulary created by the art collectives through initiatives such as urban interventions; performances; direct actions; *escraches*²; culture jamming (for example installations made with housing market advertising placards); and paste-ups on the walls of the Prestes Maia created symbolic weapons against the threat of evictions and interfered in the corporate media’s official discourse on the housing movement.³

The community formed around Prestes Maia, including dwellers, activists, art collectives and other collaborators was not only in dialogue with those who wished to evict the squatters but also had to deal with difficulties in striking agreements with the MSTC itself, often becoming confused with, or clashing with, the demands of a hierarchised movement. Furthermore artists had to be wary of projecting art works onto an extremely delicate social situation in a way which could serve simply to highlight their own production in the art world. Or worse still, in a way which would legitimate the use of cultural capitalism to link a civilised and paying audience to processes of urban revitalisation.

The creative *dissensus* which has emerged out of the housing struggle movement highlights the need to construct social spaces that allow artistic autonomy, critical thinking and differences in artistic strategy to emerge. An important lesson from the Prestes Maia occupation was the need to avoid both old strategies of representational political art and the mistake of relegating artists to providing a mere marketing campaign for the movement. Instead attempts were made to facilitate a continuing process of experiential education which allowed groups to work together without expropriation - opening up a dialogic interaction between artists, movements and communities. Art’s capacity for revolutionary transformation is only manifested by means of collective creation of daily life, in the language and space of the city.

Hope for a new life still soars for the 468 families who lived in the Prestes Maia occupation. Their stories remind me of something written by North-American historian and activist Howard Zinn: In

order not to lose heart, he tells us, it is necessary to envisage struggle as a long term transformation. We don’t need to participate in great heroic acts, small actions shared and taken up through further initiatives can multiply and modify the context from whence they came from, reaching people who are in other parts of Brazil, other parts of the world or even over there in Redfern. A revolutionary change is an infinite succession of surprises that move towards a more fair society.

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Translated by Gavin Adams.

ENDNOTES

¹ This and other movements take their name from their homeless condition prior to occupying a building: *sem-teto*, literally meaning “roofless”. For clarity’s and brevity’s sake this translation adopts the English term *squatters*.

² [Editor’s note –*escrache* is a strategy created by Argentine groups to reveal the torturers and collaborators with military regime. The Brazilian groups made an appropriation of this strategy using in different contexts with dwellers and the housing struggle movement.)

³ For example, the massive banner “ZUMBI SOMOS NÓS” (We Are Zumbi), made by Frente 3 de Fevereiro and installed at the top of Prestes Maia building, which creates a direct connection to an urban *quilombo* on São Paulo downtown; the performances created by Catadores de Histórias and Tranca RUa; woodcuts with the phrase “INTEGRAÇÃO SEM POSSE X REINTEGRAÇÃO DE POSSE” (Integration Into Non-Ownership X Reinstatement Of Ownership), made by Coletivo Dragão da Gravura, the gentrification posters created by BijaRi or the poster “VIDA X PROPRIEDADE” (Life X Propriety), by Esqueleto Coletivo, in order to emphasize the dichotomies between social inequality and economic interests; the appropriation and subversion of real estate advertising street placards, such as barricades made by the Elefante, which joined together formed the word “DIGNIDADE” (Dignity), an anti-gentrification/real estate speculation exhibition with artistic interventions and installations made with these placards, SPLAC, promoted by Experiência Imersiva Ambiental, and the placard with the phrase “ZONA DE POESIA ÁRIDA” (Zone of Arid Poetry), by Cia. Cachorra, installed on front of Prestes Maia occupation. Used as tactical images and linguistic suggestions, these conceptual interventions alerted the media and public opinion about the resistance and the social situation of the families living in popular occupations in São Paulo downtown