

BRAZIL: the cultural contemporary

Friday 21 January 2011, 10:00-17:00

Royal College of Art, Kensington Gore,
London SW7 2EU

A FREE one-day conference followed by a reception

Pre-registration is essential: email

julia.bunnage@formingideas.org or call **+44 (0)7909 963509**



This conference is the result of research undertaken in Brazil in spring 2010 and has been developed in partnership with the Royal College of Art. Brazil has one of the fastest growing economies in the world and a complex history and identity. This conference aims to inform a UK-based audience about Brazil's contemporary visual culture, with a focus on areas of craft, design and social change.

Adélia Borges, the leading Brazilian design writer and curator, will give the keynote lecture on Brazilian contemporary craft and design and their context.

Kiki Mazzuchelli, writer, curator and Brazilian PhD researcher (TrAIN/University of the Arts), will explore the influential legacy of Lina Bo Bardi (1914-1992), who integrated European modernist and Brazilian vernacular cultures in her architecture, design and projects.

Frederico Duarte, Calouste Gulbenkian Foundation Scholar, will discuss social projects led by academics and practitioners, drawing on his extensive recent primary research in Brazil.

Tristan Manco, designer and author of *Graffiti Brasil*, will analyse the relationship between street life and cultural development through graffiti and graphics.

Cristiana Tejo, coordinator of Education at Fundação Joaquim Nabuco and an independent curator based in Recife, north-eastern Brazil, will lecture on the artist Adriana Varejão, renowned for her painted tile installations as a discourse on Brazilian postcolonial experience.

Bronac Ferran, Senior Research Tutor in the department of Innovation Design Engineering at the RCA and former Director of Interdisciplinary Arts at Arts Council England, will focus on hi-tech creative projects in Brazil.

MA students from the Department of Design Products at the RCA - **Maximillian Gubbins, Attua Aparicio, Sarah Colson, Alexander Groves** - will give a presentation on their environmental design project with top designer Marcelo Rosenbaum in Sao Paulo last summer and their response to current craft/design issues in Brazil.

Justin McGuirk, award-winning design writer for *The Guardian* and former Editor of *Icon*, will be the Respondent to the conference papers and include reflection on his own recent experience of Brazil.

Chair and convenor: **Martina Margetts**, Senior Tutor, Critical & Historical Studies, RCA.



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Craft, Design and Social Change

Lecture by Adélia Borges

In the first place, I would like to give warm thanks for the invitation to be here – thank you Martina Margetts, Ann Jones, Julia Bunnage and all the team that worked for this happen.

I come from a part of the world – the Southern hemisphere –which traditionally exports raw materials and consumes not only merchandise, but trends, views of the world and cultural movements from the Northern hemisphere. That a centre which has been creating these tendencies, as London, would show interest in learning about what is taking place in a country which, until recently, was known only for its football, beaches and music is a sign of change in this flux; a move towards more equal and multidirectional exchanges. I am thankful, therefore, for your interest and presence, today.

We are currently living in an exciting moment in Brazil, a moment of great change. These changes appear not only in books, but can be seen in the lives of each one of us, Brazilians. In the 1960's, 1970's and part of the 1980's, we lived under a fierce dictatorship, we could not choose our government; we had no freedom of press or freedom to gather and meet. I myself was arrested by the political police and tortured: they were times of fear, of feeling cornered. In our economy, the immense wealth of our raw materials had no impact on the income of the majority of the population, which lived at the limits of poverty and even absolute destitution. There were many people who were illiterate or with low levels of schooling – and I had no need to go far to see this, as my own parents had less than a year of access to school.

The growth of the Brazilian economy, the reduction of internal poverty, social development and the flowering of our national culture are well-known facts, and there is no need to talk about this. I only wanted to set the context in order for us to understand what is the “cultural contemporary” in Brazil today, the theme of our conference.

I will situate my lecture in these recent years, years in which Brazilian design began to be, perhaps not better known, but rather less unknown abroad, especially thanks to the international success of the Campana brothers. However, in order to contextualize our design and craft, I will go back in time a little.

To cut a long story short, I will limit myself to two periods. One was the turn of the last century, when Alberto Santos Dumont, fascinated with the idea that man could fly, moved to Paris and began to design balloons. He designed several models, until he was able, in 1901, to prove drivability in the air. The goal of flying an aircraft heavier than the air was only reached in 1906, when he designed the 14 Bis. In 1907, he created what I consider to be his masterpiece: the Demoiselle, whose technical drawings he published in the Popular Mechanics magazine, waiving patent rights. In the years that followed publication, over 200 similar machines were created in various parts of the world. Santos Dumont also projected the running-door hangar, multi-functional furniture for small spaces and clothing articles which became his trademarks, such as the high-necked shirt and the wavy straw hat with a high crown. He also suggested the first wristwatch to his friend Louis Cartier, among other projects. And Cartier made the series “Santos” to celebrate it.

The second moment is between the 1940's and 1960's, a period of a timid beginning of industrialization in Brazil, but of great enthusiasm about the country's possibilities. The economy was growing and there was a lot of hope in the country. The construction of a new federal capital, Brasília, in a very small timeframe (1956 to 1960), brought a huge demand for modern furniture. Important names from this period are Joaquim Tenreiro, Sergio Rodrigues, Zanine Caldas and Flavio de Carvalho. Some of them deliberately used Brazilian vernacular culture as a starting point to develop their creations, which nowadays are reaching high prices in the international antiques market.

I now enter more directly into the subject of my lecture, which is the relation between design and craft in Brazil.

1964, year of the State coup which set in place the military dictatorship in the country, was also when our first university-level design course, the School of Industrial Design (Escola Superior de Desenho Industrial - Esdi), started its activities in Rio de Janeiro. Its teaching program was entirely based on the Ulm School of Design, in Germany, from where some of the teaching staff came. They brought to us the ideas of “good form” or “good design”. If “form follows function”, it is not necessary to pay attention to local cultures since, obtained in an “adequate” form, it could be repeated indefinitely, independent of time and place. This philosophy became the dominant force in the teaching and practice of our design. For many years, our product designers attempted to make objects as antiseptic and pure as the Germans; and our graphic designers to make pages and projects as clean and dry as Swiss graphics.

The institutionalization of design in the region was, then, based on the rupture with the ancestral knowledge which is manifested in the continent's material culture. The deliberate desire to abolish the hand-made object in favour of the machine-made obeyed the vision that the manual tradition was part of a past of sub-development and poverty, which a promising future brought by machines would help us overcome. In the name of progress and the desired insertion of Brazil among the developed nations, it would be best to bury these empirical practices and substitute them for the New, with a capital N; the redemption which would be brought by a future written by purely rational principles - Science, Technique, Methodology.

It was supposed that only the adhesion to an "international style" of design would give us a passport to reach international recognition. The universities also prepared their students for the serial production market, typical of the great industries of developed countries.

Voices against the current

A few names arose against the uncritical importing of the standards of thought and practice of the Ulm School of Design. Among these, it is worth mentioning the two names which in my opinion were essential to this resistance.

The first is Aloisio Magalhães, artist and designer, who took part in the creation of Esdi but did not share the belief of functionalist hegemony. Invited to work in the cultural area of the Federal Government, Aloisio set up, in 1975, a center for Cultural Reference (Centro Nacional de Referência Cultural - CNRC). A question posed by Severo Gomes, who was then Minister for Industry and Commerce, about Brazilian products, led to the Centre's creation: "Why is there no recognition for the Brazilian product? Why does it not have its own physiognomy?" Aloisio remembers: "My most immediate response was that, in order to create a culture's own physiognomy, it is first necessary to know the reality of that culture in its various moments".

The studies carried out by the Center sought to map out, document and understand the material and immaterial wealth of Brazilian culture. This knowledge would originate, in Aloisio's opinion, a stand against the "impoverishing homogenization", or the "flattening of the world". Among the studies they carried out are those on the transformation of old tyres into an infinity of new products found in fairs in the Northeast and on the weaving developed on manual looms in the region of Minas Gerais.

The second is the Italian born Lina Bo Bardi, architect and designer. Kiki Mazzuchelli will speak about her. I will just quote a sentence to anticipate her thoughts. Upon arrival from Italy, a country with a strong tradition of trade corporations, Lina was enchanted with the capacity of the Brazilian people for problem solving. In her own words: “This part of humanity, led by necessity, to solve for themselves the existential problem itself and without possessing this pseudo-culture, has the necessary strength for the development of a new and real culture. This latent force exists in high degree in Brazil, where a primordial form of primitive civilization, (not in a naive sense, but made up of essential elements, real and concrete), coincides with the most advanced forms of modern thought.”

From design X craft to design + craft

The fact is these were isolated voices. Aloísio died early; and Lina dedicated herself mainly to practice in architecture, more than to theory or teaching. The universities continued to teach design based on the search for projects which allowed rationalized serial reproduction. As industrialization in the country was still in its beginning, the consequence was the stagnation of design and the lack of a job market for the young graduates.

On the other hand, our craft tradition was pulverized, spread over rural areas of poor regions, loosing people, and suffering from an accentuated loss of cultural significance. The rich traditions of manual production, in which communities made products for their own consumption, began to suffer due to competition from industrial products imported from China, and the artisans began to repeat the industrial forms and/ or to adopt stereotypes in production. In all regions of Brazil the same “motifs” could be seen: scenes of snow or fluffy polar bears, berries and other delicacies exclusive to the northern hemisphere which appeared on a variety of artisanal products, from pottery to dish-cloth embroidery and painting.

In the mid 1980's, a movement of designers began, directed towards the country's interior in search of the preservation of productive techniques which had been passed down through the generations, but with the incorporation of new elements of design.

Among the key names in this movement, I'd like to highlight Renato Imbroisi, Heloisa Crocco and Janete Costa, who have worked all over the country. As a collective initiative at

the local level, relevant work has been carried out by the Artisanal Work and Sewing Cooperative of Rocinha (Cooperativa de Trabalho Artesanal e de Costura da Rocinha/ Coopa – Roca), created in 1982 in the Rocinha shantytown, in Rio de Janeiro, led by TT Leal. These, in my opinion, are the initiatives and names that marked the start of this type of work, carrying it out with competence and with excellent results. At a second moment, many new names came up, and nowadays it is a very spread practice in Brazil, also exported to other countries. I will not go deeper into this because it is the subject of Frederico Duarte.

Some paths have been followed during this development. We can mention initiatives for:

- . Improvement of working condition for artisans;
- . Improvement of technical conditions of the product and of standards of quality;
- . Making use of the potential of local materials;
- . Developing graphic and packaging design for artisanal products;
- . And – in my opinion the most important point – initiatives which “anchor” the formal references of the objects in local cultural traditions.

Initiatives such as these show that a true “silent (r)evolution” is taking place, a term used by Australian Kevin Murray, researcher, curator in the area of design and craft and an activist of the south–south cultural dialogue. And he speaks not only about Brazil, but about many Latin American countries, where this powerful and fertile blend is happening.

The “erudite” that borrows from the communities

It is a two ways relationship. Not only trained designers visit the communities in order to develop products with and for the artisans. Also many of them get their inspirations from the artisans, or make direct use of this crafts approach in their work.

In Brazil, the Campana brothers are the most recognized example of this practice. But they are not the only ones, by far. In the field of product design, it is worth mentioning Mana Bernardes, Estúdio Manus, Domingos Tótora and Flávia Amadeu. I am pleased that Domingos and Flávia will take part in the exhibition at The Brit Insurance Designs Awards, which will open next month at London Design Museum. I was invited by curator Alex Newson to nominate 3 products, and fortunately 2 of them were selected.

Flavia’s jewellery uses a new material, rubber sheets produced by micro latex processing plants installed in the Amazonian forests of Brazil and operated by the rubber tappers and

their families, using simple techniques and low cost equipments. The technology, called Tecbor (Technology for the production of rubber and artefacts in the Amazon), was developed by the Chemical Technology Laboratory of the University of Brasilia, and enables the preparation of previously coloured sheets. As this goes without the processing stage, the rubber tappers in the Amazon can have a higher profit. The design takes advantage of the flexibility and lightness of the material. Bracelets and necklaces become three-dimensional when placed by the user on the body in many positions. They have innovative forms.

The bench Solo, by Domingos Tótora, uses a recycled material that he created, in which discarded cardboard and empty bags of cement are mixed with water and glue. This “new material” looks like wood and also has its resistance and behaviour. Domingos Tótora developed the material after seeing the great amount of cardboard discarded by a company in the small village where he lives. The material and the resulting pieces of furniture, objects and sculptures are hand made by craftsmen Domingos has trained.

In fashion, perhaps one of the most vibrant segments today, we have names such as Lino Villaventura, Ronaldo Fraga and Jum Nakao. In 2004 Nakao made a catwalk show at São Paulo Fashion Week that ended with the models tearing apart their own vegetable paper clothes – a way he found to betray the fugacity of fashion. In graphic design, Rico Lins, J. Cunha, Enéas Guerra, Simone Mattar, Eduardo Recife and Lobo. There is a very interesting mix between manual and digital techniques in some works.

I consider this rapport to be an extremely important phenomenon, for the social and economic impact it generates and for its cultural significance. I have been one of its warmest defenders, proclaiming it to the four winds as a journalist, as a lecturer, as an exhibition curator, and also in my four-year passage as director of the Museu da Casa Brasileira (a museum that belongs to the government of the State of São Paulo and is completely specialized in design and architecture). I have carried out some exhibitions on this theme when I was there.

Since I left the Museum, in 2007, I have had more freedom to travel the country researching the extension of this phenomenon of permeability between the so-called high culture and the so-called low culture. Last year, I had the satisfaction of being curator-general for the exhibition Puras Misturas, which gathered, in the same exhibition space, popular and erudite artists, designers and groups of Indians or of artisans, to express the

hybrid nature of Brazilian culture. This mesh, in my opinion, constitutes our culture's biggest strength. The name of the exhibition - Puras Misturas - is hard to translate, it would mean something like "Pure Blends" or "Pure Mixtures", and was created by one of our most important writers, Guimarães Rosa. The exhibition occupied around 2,500 m² of a magnificent building designed by Oscar Niemeyer in the 1950's in the Ibirapuera Park, in São Paulo.

"Pure Blends" reveals what I believe is the main quality of Brazilian culture: its mixture, its diversity, hybridity. The chair Multidão, by Fernando and Humberto Campana, which is made from an assemblage of rag dolls, was displayed alongside a collection of dolls from the old Folklore Museum (the collection now belongs to the Pavilhão das Culturas Brasileiras). On the other side, there was a doll designed more recently by fashion designer Ronaldo Fraga, another Brazilian who delves deep into popular culture to find inspiration for his work. Other objects present were those inspired directly by the lace which has been produced by artisans for centuries, such as the dinner set by Marcelo Rosenbaum and pottery by Caroline Harari, which uses the lace itself to produce texture on the clay. By re-contextualizing lace-work, placing it on another type of material, Caroline highlights the wealth of detail of this manual work.

One of the highlights of the exhibition was the installation of seats, which included on the same plane - the floor - items made by anonymous artisans, by the indigenous peoples and by erudite designers. Some designers drank deeply from the source of popular tradition. Sergio Rodrigues was inspired by a milking stool to create his celebrated *Mochô*, from 1954, an icon of Brazilian design. The rustic stool from the interior of Minas Gerais was present, revealing a wise grasp of ergonomics. The double inclination of the seat offers perfect conditions of comfort for sitting, and the structure of the legs shows the technical wisdom which results in a resistant and durable object. Also present were the reinterpretations of this stool by Carlos Simas, Francisco Fanucci and Flávia Pagotti Silva, with projects that maintain some of the original characteristics but are also marked by diversity. And many other types of stools, where the circularity between "high" and "low" cultures is evident

Also on display were stools that are still made by the indigenous peoples of the Amazon region today. The stools were chosen for this exhibition because they are an emblematic object of Brazilian design, as it has been a part of our culture since before the arrival of

Europeans, five centuries ago. Until the 19th century chairs were rare in Brazilian society, restricted to the houses of the elite and locations of governmental powers.

The exhibition also contained samples of objects made by the low-income population and found on the city streets, such as carts for sale of coffee, popcorn and sweets in the streets and barbecues grills. We are beginning a collection on this vernacular design. The exhibition covered 2,500 m² and gathered design, craft, visual arts and architecture. A short video shows this circularity between the so-called high and low spheres in all these types of medium.

Sustainability

The careful observation of craft and vernacular design in Brazil allows us to take note of valuable lessons on the appropriate use of the conditions and productive techniques available in each region. Brazilians have used sustainable techniques even before the word ecology was spread. Motivated by poverty, Brazilians have always recycled and created based on available conditions. This attitude also migrated to industrial design.

I had a chance to further study this issue during the Bienal Brasileira de Design, of which I was curator, held last year, in Curitiba. The main exhibition was called Design, Innovation and Sustainability. We gathered 260 projects from all over Brazil, with an emphasis on industrial production.

To just give a flavour of what is going on in Brazilian industrial design, we can see the creations of

- . Fernando Prado – very smart and simple pieces, almost every year he wins a prize at IF Design, in Hanover Fair.
- . Chelles and Hayashi – washing machine very, very cheap, light and easy to transport, that can be shared among neighbours
- . Sergio Rodrigues, that since the 1950s is hard working
- . Guto Indio da Costa – his plastic and coloured fan is a best seller in Brazil
- . In urban design, Jaime Lerner, with solutions that he calls urban acupuncture. Few money and non aggressive methods, with effective results.

What they have in common, in my opinion: simplicity, low cost. But the industrial design would be a subject for another lecture... Brazil is a big country, with a huge diversity... Anyway, if you are interested in knowing more about this, have a look at

www.mam.org.br/fronteiras and www.bienalbrasileiradedesign.com.br. There you can find much more.

Dangers and mistakes

Returning to the liaison between design and craft in Brazil, as I was saying, I am a great enthusiast of it. However, we must remain alert: within this trend, there have also been many mistakes, many bad experiences. There is the need of an urgent discussion. Some experiences show:

- . Lack of real respect for local cultures
- . Works without continuity
- . Unequal exchanges

The one-off visits, short consulting trips of a few days in general bring great media coverage for the designers who travel to the communities but leave no positive results in these communities, besides enormous expectations which are almost always frustrated.

A procedure that took place in some regions was the hiring of expensive consultants to carry out, during brief visits, an iconographic survey of a region. So far, so good. The problem is when these elements are transformed into recipes that reduce local traditions to icons which are bare of meaning, becoming formulae bare of content. The publications which result from these studies are often very expensive. Fancy paper, colour printing, hard covers; a coffee table book that might impress the naïve visitor, but brings no benefit to the artisans.

I have held many lectures throughout the country, and in some I met artisans who, timidly, told me they are unable of producing work according to these icons, often feeling that the problem lies with them, in their lack of capacity and in their lack of instruction, and not with the process.

Another thing that has taken place is visits by teams to communities taking with them ready-made projects, so the artisans end up elaborating with their own hands something that others have created. This is a posture that sees designers or design students – in other words, people with formal schooling – as superior to the artisans, people without formal schooling. In these cases what takes place is a meeting – or a detour! – between unequal people. The power, the sagacity, the dominance lies with the studios. The “others” join in with their ability, their skill with their hands and, at the most, their familiarity with the raw matter.

In my opinion, it is best to leave an artisanal manifestation alone than to intervene without care, with pretension. The potential dangers of a badly carried out intervention are many and their effects can be damaging. The older a tradition is and the more “away from civilization” the community it belongs to, the greater the dangers and the greater the necessary care.

Respect is essential

The basis for this development, this exchange, in my opinion, must be respect. Respect for the work rhythm of the artisan, respect for the signs that have resisted over the years, respect for the whole system of symbols that culminates in an object. Respect for the imperfect beauty of hand-made objects. And not to introduce the universe of the machine-made; this would bring a loss of grace and enchantment.

The mistakes made up to now should serve to learn from. Personally, I do not believe in magical formulae or recipes; and I do not believe in external saviours. The process must involve whenever possible professionals from that specific region. External consultants can start up a dialogue and set things in motion, but there must be continuity based on local links. We must urgently reflect upon the ethical parameters to be observed in this encounter, as well as share methodologies which will allow a true dialogue to take place.

There may be situations where a designer or a company will ask for nothing more than labour from the artisans. There is no problem with this, as long as it is clear what is being requested and payment is correctly carried out. It is necessary, also, to understand that artisans are not companies. In Brazil many are illiterate and would not be able to establish an equal relationship. A company once ordered 200 woven items from a community. The artisans organized themselves, bought the raw material, rented an extra room in a house to accommodate everyone and contracted debts with suppliers. In the following month, the company made no more orders and this brought losses they had no way of covering and, above all, an enormous internal chaos.

It is common to see a group of designers or students travel to a community, use local labour at will and then leave with beautiful photographs of the fine products which were made there, to be featured in glossy magazines throughout the world, saying they are carrying out a social project, when in truth they are simply using cheap labour which in

return receives – in money, recognition and prestige – a lot less than received by the designers.

In one of the most beautiful texts on craft that I have read, Mexican writer Octavio Paz says: “Made with the hands, the artisanal object conserves, in reality or metaphorically, the digital impressions of its creator. These impressions are the artist’s *signature*, not a name, or a mark. But a sign: a faint scar that commemorates the original fraternity of mankind. Made with the hands, the artisanal object is made for the hands: not only can we see it but touch it.”

The original fraternity among mankind, that Paz speaks of, cannot survive if, in this new move towards a rapport between design and craft, the dominant dichotomy becomes that which I mentioned before, between the designer who brings the brain and the artisan who collaborates with manual skill. If this persists, not only would we be denying the mental abilities of those who work with their hands, but we would also deny the immense possibility of the hands, brought to those who until then were disconnected from this wonderful possibility.

If we can guarantee this dialogue, I believe that this connection can continue to bring enormous benefits. As craft is scattered around the country, the economic benefits are hard to measure. When the output of our fringe areas is fostered and improved, a wide range of people are given conditions to survive. In one of the exhibitions I organized at the Museu da Casa Brasileira, I placed two photographs: the house of an artisan before participating in a program for craft revitalization, and the same house after taking part in the program. It showed an improvement of his quality of life. Often, for a family, participating in the revival of handmade production can be the difference between having something to eat or not. Many of these programs are carried out in areas where there are periods of prolonged drought, periods where large portions of the rural population became jobless and often literally starved to death.

The economic dimension is important, but insufficient to measure the impact of this work. The social dimension, in my opinion, is noteworthy. In some cases where craft groups managed to set up a better structure, an inversion is taking place in the migration flux, which is traditionally in the direction of rural to urban. The problem is that our cities are not prepared to absorb all the arriving population, which will become sub-employed in the urban centres, living in shanty towns or on the streets, cut off from their cultural roots. In

the interior of Minas Gerais, for example, a region I am well acquainted with, as it is my birth state, some places are seeing a return of young people to their home towns, excited at the possibility of an income generated by craft.

Last, but not least, we can speak of the cultural dimension of this phenomenon. Large portions of the population who were accustomed to turning their gaze outwards are now rediscovering their own roots. This sense of belonging emerges with pride. And the transforming potential that the rescue of self esteem triggers in people is enormous.

The convergence of the economic, environmental, social and cultural dimensions is, in my opinion, the key issue for evaluating design nowadays. And it is for this reason that this “silent (r)evolution” is so valuable to us.

In the beginning of my speech, I mentioned the exciting moment we are living in Brazil, today. In 1994, 17 years ago, I was invited to write about Brazilian design for the German magazine *Form*. I was very pleased with the invitation, with their interest, and with a front page on the theme. The title chosen by the editor for my report was: “Brazilian design: Rich in future”. I confess I was a little disappointed, as we were always told that Brazil was the country of the future, but this future never seemed to arrive. Today, I can say that, at least in the field of design, the future has arrived. And I can say that my impression is that the best is yet to come.

Thank you very much.