

THOUGHTS IN GERUND, AS A TEACHER, ARTIST, CURATOR

Maria do Carmo Nino

ABSTRACT

This article presents my experience as a producer of artistic works, exhibition curator and cultural and artistic analyst. I will place special relevance on two artistic experiences – the MAMÃE Project, that revolves around the work, *Olho Mágico* [Magic Eye], and the Exhibition *ContidoNãoContido*. The work *Olho Mágico* appears as a self-referential comment, a parody. A blind wall is transformed into a kind of window, as if mediating the possible dialogues between what is perceived as interior and exterior space. In the exhibition *ContidoNãoContido* we aimed to encourage visitors to feel the need to critically deconstruct the sense of “obliged reverence” often associated to museums.

PALAVRAS-CHAVE

Art; museum; deconstruction; dialogue

RESUMO

Apresento um relato da minha experiência enquanto produtora de trabalho artístico, curadora de exposições, analista cultural e artística. Neste artigo será dada particular relevância a duas experiências artísticas – Projeto MAMÃE, com reflexão em torno da obra *Olho Mágico*, e a Exposição *ContidoNãoContido*. A obra *Olho Mágico* surge como comentário autorreferencial, paródico. A transformação de uma parede cega em uma espécie de janela, como que intermedia os possíveis diálogos entre o que se percebe como espaço interior e exterior. Na exposição *ContidoNãoContido* procuramos suscitar no visitante a necessidade de desconstruir criticamente a “reverência de tom forçado” frequentemente associada ao museu.

PALAVRAS-CHAVE

Arte; museu; desconstrução; diálogo

“Only the imaginary can develop the germ”

(Deleuze, 1985, p. 120)

SOME NOTES FROM MY PERSONAL HISTORY

I graduated with a B.A. Hons. degree in Architecture in 1980. This was the course available in my town that lay closest to an idea of artistic creation based on visual characteristics, in terms of shapes, colours, volume, and space. I then had the opportunity to

pursue post-graduate studies in Visual Arts (artistic processes) at Paris 1- Sorbonne. My true artistic production commenced during my time in Paris (between 1988 and 1995), which was a period of extreme importance and richness that enabled me to discover myself as an individual and an artist.

Upon my return to Brazil, I started working as a professor of Visual Arts at the Federal University of Pernambuco (UFPE). Since then I have been involved in the transfer of specific knowledge about artistic issues, in constant contact with other professors, artists and managers.

This role was considerably amplified through more effective participation in various activities related to the fine arts: as a producer of artistic work, curator of exhibitions, cultural analyst and artistic analyst of aesthetic production.

Since then my activities have combined the experience of curating exhibitions and writing texts about artists, as well as teaching in the Visual Arts degree course and in the postgraduate programme in Literature (related to inter-semiotic dialogue with the visual arts). Pursuit of my own artistic practice has been constantly influenced by these activities, between verbal and nonverbal production, and I therefore can't establish distinct hierarchies between them, in order to identify my overall career trajectory.

In my personal work, I continue to work with the image, although not exclusively, and this passion has been a constant feature of my career from the outset, ranging between painting, drawing and photography, with special emphasis on the latter as an initial catalyst of the creative process. This has brought me closer to experiences with the digital image. I identify myself with series, sequences, narratives, modulations, and the procedural dimension that is established with the idea of *becoming*, and intrinsic incompleteness, a concept that is very dear to me and with which I've always worked.

Being fond of experimentation, and more experienced with digital interfaces, I began to introduce such experimentation in photography, drawing and painting, through direct manipulation via the computer, or even on the printed image itself. Ultimately they are all palimpsests, i.e. hybrid forms which I believe incorporate the idea of transformation and temporalities. It stimulates me to think about how much we can use digital tools to develop the basic languages of drawing and painting (dot, line, colour, stain) in their several nuances, taking advantage of the vast range of options offered by these media (resize, invert, merge, distort, scale intensity variations, etc.). Such values cannot be otherwise obtained with the same precision or control. Here are several examples:

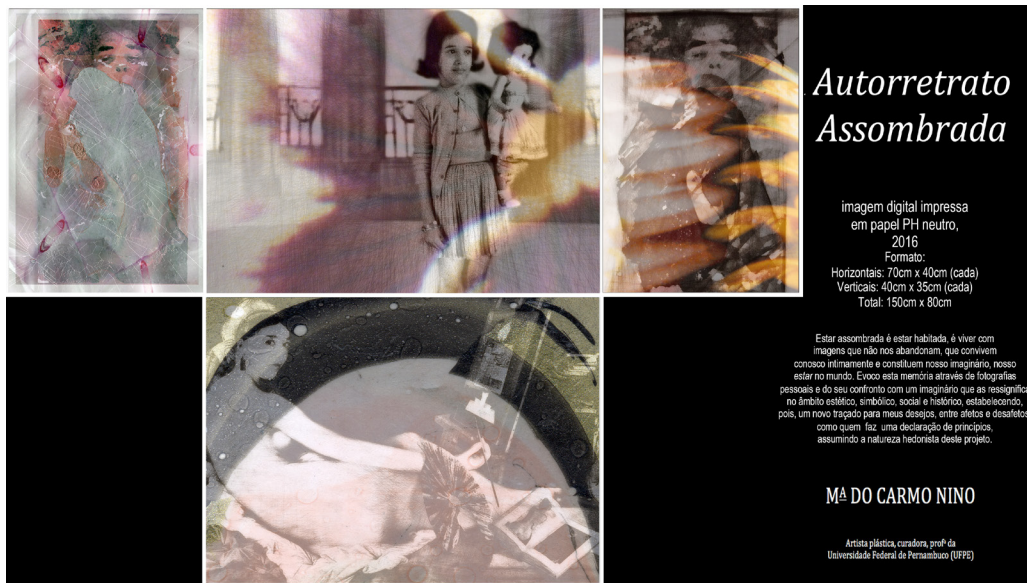


Figure 1: Autoretrato Assombrada [Haunted Selfportrait], Maria do Carmo Nino

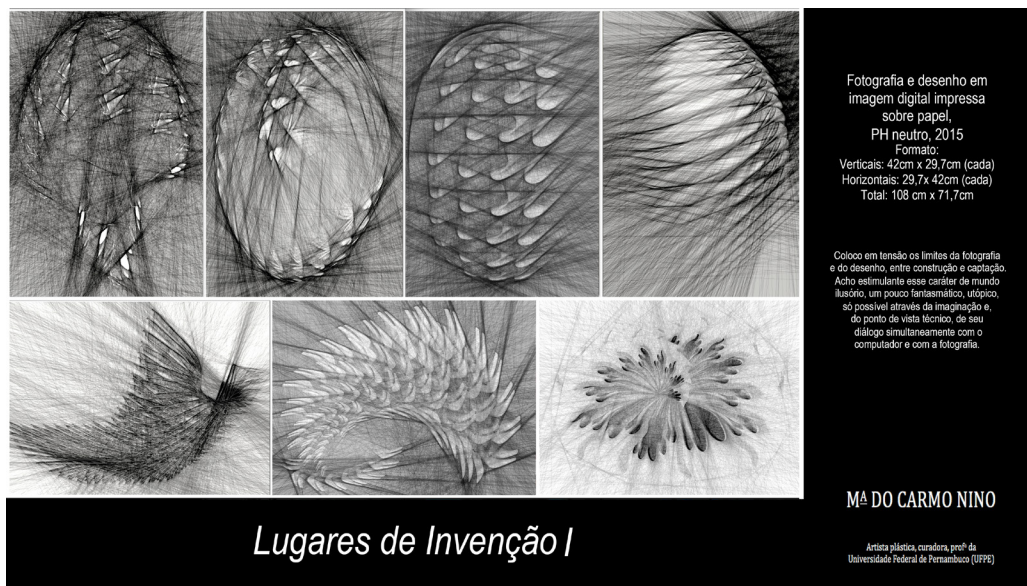


Figure 2: Lugares de Invenção I [Places of Invention I], Maria do Carmo Nino

REPORTS OF TWO EXPERIMENTS

I admire many artists, and my teaching activity encourages me to renew my artistic references. However, if I had to highlight certain artists, they'd be the ones who knew how to combine their own artistic practice with theory and teaching in some cases, and perhaps that is why a metalinguistic approach appeals to me, because it fosters self-conscious explanation, as a critical and creative principle.

FIRST EXPERIENCE¹

During the SPA – Visual Arts Week of Recife, between 3 and 8 November, 2003, a group from Recife, called *Quarta Parede* (Fourth Wall)² made an artistic proposal that consisted of an invitation addressed to all artists who wished to be involved or become part of a collective occupation of the building next to the Aluísio Magalhães Museum of Modern Art (MAMAM). The proposal had the suggestive name of “Projeto MAMÃE” [Mom Project] and intended to shelter, without any thematic restrictions, discriminations or vetoes of any kind³, artistic proposals from various artists (or even aspiring artists), with different levels of experience, and with distinct degrees of legitimation from the institutional arts system. This was an intentional, clear and transgressive counterpoint to the established situation of leadership of a space important for Recife, such as MAMAM, which shows exhibitions of work by renowned artists at the national and international level, where the selection criteria are complex and not always known or understood by everyone, and which is sometimes severely criticised by artists in general.

In this reverse curatorial work carried out by the group, the works weren’t chosen in function of their artistic qualities (or lack thereof). Visitors would therefore have the opportunity to see aesthetic proposals that were democratically exhibited in the same site, with very different levels of maturation and sophistication. Visitors would be able to judge their own affinities in this heteroclitic “family” and, at the same time, experience a certain sense of unfamiliarity, not to mention astonishment, due to the material conditions of the exhibition site and how the works were displayed, without necessarily establishing any significant dialogues – thematic or otherwise – with each other, as is normally expected to occur.

The museum building was being remodelled on the ground floor, and everyone potentially involved in the exhibition could only use the first floor. The various kinds of occupation by the artists involved in the project subsequently demonstrated how each person viewed the space. For many it clearly meant a welcoming space of freedom – everything that a mother is supposed to be; a place with its own history, not initially designed to host art exhibitions, but in a situation of quasi abandonment. The environment’s physical precariousness, impregnated with textures of all kinds, chaotic, resembling a ruined space, undoubtedly served as a constraint, inclusively in terms of guaranteeing safety, but these conditions were nonetheless incorporated into many of the works on display and in some cases were even moderately reinforced. In general, the word “ruin” relates to a situation of deterioration of a specific building or movable property, simply due to the natural wear and tear caused over time or other factors, without there being a sufficient attempt made to halt the alterations in relation to their original state. On the other hand, ruins have an undeniable aesthetic appeal, especially when they reveal memories of the past, celebrations of utopias that aren’t rooted in the future, but in prior real or

¹ This account was partly extracted from my text Nino (2011).

² The group then was composed of the visual artists Daviana Barros, Izidório Cavalcanti and Mozart Santos, all of them working in Recife.

³ Just wanting to exhibit your work and paying a fee to supplement the rental of the property.

imagined history, as painting, literature and cinema have always been able to celebrate. It can be said without fear of making an excessive generalisation, that most of the artists weren't held back by the building's history. Instead, they were broadly divided between those who brought a pre-existing work and tailored it to the aforementioned space, and others who conceived something new that could exist in a more intimate and visceral manner, based on confrontation with the space's current state. Here are reproductions of some of the interventions in the space:

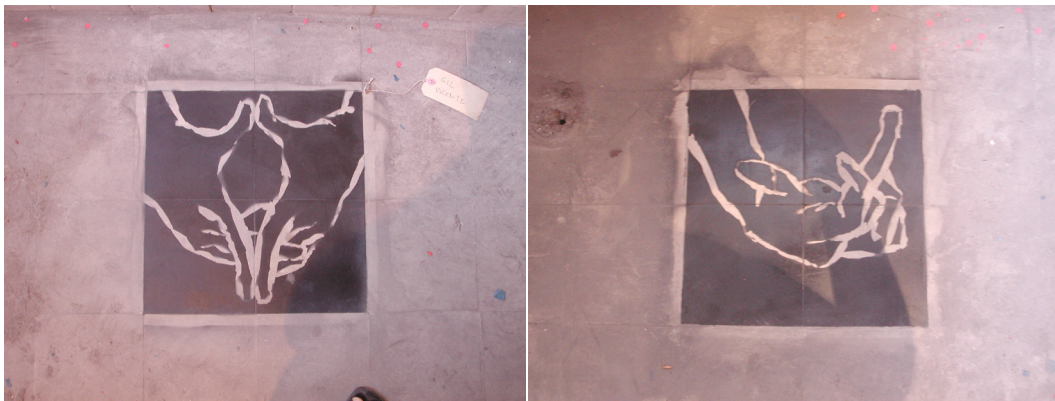


Figure 3: Gil Vicente, Untitled, Spa 2003



Figure 4: Braz Marinho, Untitled, Spa 2003

Figure 5: Felipe Lyra, Untitled, Spa 2003



Figures 6 and 7: Bruno Vilela, Untitled, Spa 2003

When I visited the exhibition space and realised its actual material state, wherein the conditions of the facilities were directly opposed to the conditions of the neighbouring building, I immediately realised how interesting it would be to bring to my proposal the spirit that initially gave birth to the project, as inaugurated by the group. Ultimately this was my main motivation to be included in the project. Although it was not a pre-determined premise of participation, it was tempting to use this space while taking into account its specific situation (located next to the city's main museum). I thought about the possibility of developing an aesthetic commentary on this relationship.

Looking more closely at the floor plan of the building, I noticed a niche in the wall, where I could see the bricks in the shape of a door. When I asked where the door led to, I was told that it was used as an old connecting passage between the buildings, owned by Recife City Council. The passage, which currently leads to the museum's circulation area, must have been sealed up when the building was sold to a private buyer.

But when I realised that there was a pre-existing communication passage, I immediately wanted to restore it, in the context of an aesthetic proposal, but this should be achieved within the framework of a critical commentary, although impregnated with a certain sense of humour and irony. Having taken this decision, I started negotiations with the administrators of the museum space, whose agreement was obviously necessary in order to proceed.

The work *Olho Mágico* [Magic Eye] is named after the peepholes inserted in the doors of the main entrances of houses or residential apartments, which allow us to look out, from the interior of the departed space, without being seen. In fact, it's not only the name that is used for this work, its appearance suits a presentation that reverberates with meanings, triggered by uses of such peepholes in our everyday social context, at least at the first or unsuspecting gaze. The work is a door that measures 2.1 x 1 metres, in unpainted wood, inserted into a niche in the wall, where the aforementioned peephole is inserted at a height just above the meeting point between the two diagonal lines formed from the door's upper corners, exactly above the demarcation line formed by the junction of the door's two wooden halves, i.e. around 120 cm above the door's lower limit. This is an unusual height, since the average adult observer must bow down in order to

perceive *what* or even *if* something or someone exists on the other side, as the entire work naturally presumes.



Figure 8: Maria do Carmo Nino, *Olho Mágico*, Spa 2003

The sense of strangeness becomes progressively noticeable when we realise that the door's function as a point of passage between the two spaces is denied, since it is not possible to open it, because there are no locks, door handles or latches. The spectator also sees the base of bricks on the ground and, from a distance, can see that it is actually supported by a massive wall: literally a hermetically-sealed and insurmountable wall.

The work thereby confirms to the public the *a priori* and ironic intention of suggesting an impossibility of effective access to the contiguous space. In this case, the door reminds us of what it could be (but is unable to be): i.e. an opening onto a mystery, possessing a dynamic value, inclusively a psychological value, since it not only indicates the passage between two spatially defined limits, but invites us to overcome them.

Deprived of the choice between the rhythmic alternative of closing and opening the door, the hope of imminent access to revelation of the space beyond the place where we find ourselves, is concentrated in the small glass orifice, which, as we all know, allows an expanded and distanced angle of vision (as with a wide-angle lens). Our possibility of access to the outside world is now reduced to the possibility of observation through this device, which thereby functions as a form of contiguity and extension of the human eye. Magic eyes confirm the function of the doors as obstacles, establishing a dividing line between the spaces that they connect, and in this case, which cannot be opened. The door is therefore attached to its supporting wall as if it were a skin, duplicating it in terms of both its shape and function. The existence of the peephole places us in the position of voyeurs, or invaders of a space that in principle we cannot cross.

It is therefore impossible not to notice the inversion of the function that is generally attributed to the socially trivialized use of the magic eye. When placed in our homes, this peephole allow us to avoid being invaded, because it allows us to control the *other*, i.e. the person, who in function of our decision, will or won't be allowed to enter our space. However, in the aforementioned situation we are placed in the perspective of acting as intruders, because we can see the person outside, without being observed by him or her, or even being invited to do so. Although the idea of the "other" (as a space or individual) is one of the core aspects of the work, in principle we are unable to know the other person's awareness of the peephole or even whether it is pertinent to consider this question.

The completion of the role of the intruder is only achieved through the gaze of the person who accepts the implicit invitation made by the assembled system when visiting the exhibition. In reality, the work's artistic nature is only revealed intermittently, i.e. as long as there is an observer who bends down to look through the door, or, as Duchamp would undoubtedly summarise the situation: it's the beholder that makes the picture. This situation is enhanced in this case, in an almost limit situation, always at the point of non-occurrence. This is because art is as much related to actions as it is to objects, as Goodman (1999, p. 13) would also say and if the work needs to be put into motion, its immediacy is never complete. As a *medium* (place, medium) of reflection, a work of art inevitably brings with it the notion of anachronistic variations, i.e. the need for distinct moments in time in order for there to be full understanding of the work.

In *Magic Eye*, the transformation of a blind wall into a kind of window, insofar as it offers itself to the spectator's gaze, mediating possible dialogues between what is now perceived as inner and outer space, is far from neutral. In fact, the insertion of the idea of the window historically determines a new way of relating to the space. It creates a relationship of surveillance, but also of permanent mechanisms to maintain this state. The desire established in this case, or simply the *muse* which in this case is incorporated by MAMAM's own space, which is contiguous, but is only unilaterally accessible via the gaze, attests to its permanent state of inexorable frustration. Only the gaze is magical and can cross borders.

Everything happened, then, as if my own critical perspective of the *Projeto Mamãe* (Mom Project) had been visually materialized in this work: as a site-specific work which only made sense in the exact place where it was presented to the public. It became spatially embedded in the exhibition's proposal suggested by the *Quarta Parede* (Fourth Wall) as a self-referential, parodic commentary, an interface with the group's proposal, which, having summarised this proposal, emphasized it in a redoubled manner for the spectator, as a kind of *mise en abîme*, without pointing to the fact that the object of desire remains unattainable.

SECOND EXPERIENCE⁴

The second experience to be reported in this article concerns the *ContidoNãoContido* (InsertedNotInserted) exhibition held at the Aloísio Magalhães Museum (MAMAM) between March and September 2010. This curatorial undertaking arose from an invitation from the museum's management board, to work, in partnership with the curator Clarissa Diniz, in assembling an exhibition to mark the reopening of the space after two years of inactivity due to building works. Our non-negotiable initial premises were that the exhibition had to be restricted to works held in the Museum's collection and that the chosen works should be on display for an unusually long period, of around six months.

These restrictions immediately posed the challenge of working with a collection that we knew in advance was relatively incomplete in terms of the inclusion of art produced in the state of Pernambuco in the 20th century. The collection includes works by around 250 artists from different places, from the state of Pernambuco and from other places, with various interests and career trajectories, using a variety of media and techniques, although in an obviously insufficient quantity to do justice to the full history of the art of Pernambuco during the period in question.

In view of this situation, we decided to adopt a flexible and experimental model, an ongoing exhibition process involving a cycle encompassing three distinct stages, each lasting two months. Another key decision was to extend the curatorial team to include EducAtivo Mamam—the Museum's art education department. After the project's long gestation period, it was decided that each of the two first stages would cover the various decades involved in the art produced in Pernambuco, which would lead to different kinds of artist, works and approaches. The third stage, perhaps the most controversial, that would bring the cycle to a close, would fill the entire exhibition space with the work of two artists whose work features most prominently in the Mamam's collection, but who have very different reputations locally, regionally and nationally in the art world.

It is necessary to acknowledge that embracing a wide range of structural issues regarding the crucial roles that institutions play in the art world meant that it was necessary for the Museum's management to delegate a certain degree of control. However, from the very outset, the proposal was well-received by the museum's director and by the EducAtivo team. A foreseen consequence of the approach taken was to highlight the weaknesses of the collection itself. A way of working as a team was developed that involved EducAtivo in new responsibilities, with a significantly reinforced period of pre-production for the team responsible for the research and production of various files. The exhibition challenged the general public with new modes of presentation and required that it be received in a variety of specific ways.

The entire experience was metalinguistic and self-referential in nature, which meant that it turned inwards on itself. Nonetheless, the knowledge acquired did not cease to have a use beyond each specific case, and could serve as a reflection that could be applied to other national or local examples. *Contidonãocontido* incorporated an attitude

⁴ This account was partly extracted from a previous work (Nino, 2015).

wherein it became necessary to pose questions about the weaknesses of our public policies and highlight the difficulties we experience in establishing and preserving our cultural heritage. It also became necessary to identify the consequences of the absence of an acquisitions policy during the early days of the collection, that was only implemented at a later stage.

The significance of this lies in the fact that this series of experiences appears to be connected, pointing to a process of becoming, by transforming the museum's institutional space into a laboratory. This would appear to be an argument in favour of the need for a crisis, which incites reflection about the museum's various social roles as a legitimising agent, and also, evidently, that of the curator as someone who assumes a decisive official discourse. This raises the question of the unquestionably social role of art in relation to other aspects of life.

EducAtivo, in this case, rather than being merely responsible for reproducing a discourse based on a choice of works drawn up by external persons – although this may have creative potential – was included in the process of selecting the artists, works and the way in which they were displayed. This undoubtedly helped members of the EducAtivo team to interpret the works, both for themselves and for members of the public who visited the museum expecting some institutional justification, confirming the fact that nowadays the content of a public collection depends on the artists themselves, the educators and the general public.

This perception of a dialogue between the various tasks involved extended the role of the members of the EducAtivo team, directly in various museum activities, rather than, as is usually the case, operating as a separate sector. Awareness of the importance of the education department has grown over time in the art world and is now indisputable, although unfortunately this perspective is not unanimous in Brazil. It can thus be claimed that this requires existing stereotypes and prejudices to be, if not entirely dispelled, at least softened, or seen in a different light or simply thought about in a critical manner, thereby allowing curators and museums to fulfil one of their most important roles – as purveyors of informal education.

The form of visual communication intended for dissemination of the event at the time was based on the model of the Möbius strip. This was observed in the title where the words were joined together without spaces, thereby uniting terms that, at first sight, seem to be diametrically opposed, thus epitomising this state of affairs. After all, the ambiguity of the characteristic spatiality of a Möbius strip in the exhibition's logo was the ideal means of setting the tone: providing the illusion of a boundary between two spaces, when in fact there is only one space. That which appears to be discontinuous is in fact a continuum; temporality is introduced into the spatial dimension, like a gerund or a present continuous.

Inside, outside, exclusion, inclusion, contained, not contained... in terms of inclusion, what does it mean to have a work in a collection that has never been shown to the public? What does it take for an artist to be received positively by a certain group of professionals, whether or not they form part of the 'establishment'? Marcel Duchamp

drew attention to the fact that museums don't necessarily contain the best art, although this is exactly the most common received wisdom. Hence, the fascinating and paradoxical topological symbol of the Möbius Strip clearly expressed our guiding concept, by bringing to light the fundamental questions underlying the whole proposal: where are the convenient boundaries that assure us with a false impression of stability? To what extent is a clear configuration of their existence still at work in the way we socially function nowadays? Moreover, how can a certain system understand itself?

In *ContidoNãoContido*, in each of the three public stages, the spectator entered the exhibition space and was confronted by a model that does not correspond to the dynamics normally found in art exhibitions. This probably gave the spectator a feeling of displacement, since, apart from the work on display, there was a specific kind of furniture, uncommon in exhibitions, with two groups composed of files, individual dossiers with information culled from intensive research carried out by the team during the preproduction stage into the artists of the respective decade. In these one could read the words "inserted" and "not inserted", referring to whether or not there were works representing them in the collection at that specific point in time.

The first section contained a group of works organized into five long periods (1900–1930, 1940–1950, 1960–1970, 1980–1990, 2000–2010) filling various parts of the Museum, from the reception area to the walls, from the ceiling to the floor, presented in ways that reflected the extent of freedom for artistic experiences over the past century. The chronological ordering was chosen to clearly highlight the unevenness of the collection – for example, the lack of works from the 1940s and 1950s contrasted with the greater quantity of work from the late twentieth century. The second stage arranged the works in such a way as to emphasise the clashes between academic, modernist and regionalist paradigms that have pervaded the history of art in Pernambuco. In the third stage, two artists were juxtaposed, in a case study of the acquisition of the collections of Luiz Carlos Guilherme and João Câmara, who, along with Samico and Vicente do Rego Monteiro, are the artists who feature most prominently in the museum collection. This stage also included a video containing testimonials from the people who participated in the acquisition of the works, followed by documents from the epoch in the exhibition space. This controversial exhibition obliged the public to (re)consider their individual beliefs regarding pre-established institutional models in relation to the legitimisation of the various sectors that make up the art world.

Arranged on a long table with pouffes and chairs in the centre of the space, there were various catalogues and books from the Museum's library shelves for consultation. There was also a multifunctional printer, paper and a computer connected to the Internet that could be used by visitors, if they felt the urge to research a specific artist, whether or not covered by the collection, or a period of specific interest, or any other aspect of the art world. This immediately challenged some of the habits of the museum-goers, since, in a reading room, they clearly found themselves distracted by the urge to interact with the various dossiers, as well as the fact that the information contained within them could not only be consulted but also complemented by information found in catalogues,

newspaper articles, more up-to-date images of the works, or any other detail concerning a specific consulted artist, in order to expand the existing files or create new ones, for which purpose empty dossiers were made available, suggesting that visitors were expected to fill them.



Figures 9 and 10: Exhibition *ContidoNãoContido*

This friendly and playful invitation aimed to socialise information in groups and promote creative interpretations, showing the link with the history of the state of Pernambuco via the work of various artists. According to the museum guides, however, visitors were reluctant to take up this opportunity. They did not interact as much as had been wished, and did not engage in the various forms of research. It may be that the lack of other examples of this kind of exhibition made it seem alien and for this reason the result fell short of expectations. The small number of new dossiers created over the exhibition's six-month period clearly indicates that new habits are not easily acquired, although they can be gradually assimilated. I would like to stress this point, because I think that our insistence on a model involving continuous expansion of the material by visitors played an important role in providing and expanding the knowledge of members of the general public interested in the visual arts and also awareness of the importance of art for understanding our history and the way that society works.

The potential to restock an archive with new information, besides helping to expand the records regarding the history of local art, may also help with future acquisitions made by the institution. The fact that this was made explicit in a wall text and the unprecedented invitation to the population of Pernambuco to send comments on their own art directly to the institution, not to mention the theme of the exhibition that pointed directly to the idea of a free flow between inclusion and exclusion, certainly fuelled expectations on the part of artists, who for various reasons, do not find themselves represented or do not feel themselves sufficiently well represented in the museum collection.

The idea of institutional recognition is undeniably a fascinating one, especially for younger artists and reminds us that still today – in an age of the more democratic forums of the Internet, blogs and YouTube – the market still functions as a prime motivator for artists when building their careers. Whether it is a private or institutional collection, official salons, or even merely for one's own personal satisfaction, the fact is that, regardless of the niche artists have found for themselves and the consequences of this, there is a market that will never cease to have economic, political and symbolic characteristics that directly reflect the degree of legitimacy an artist has in the eyes of his or her peers, family, friends, and society at large.

The desire to exercise a certain degree of control, so far as this is possible, over one's own life, to be independent, which includes our capacity to ground our social and self-image within the horizon of our chosen values, not allowing ourselves to be led astray by a dominant regulatory model, involves constant revision and renewal. In so far as it was possible the *ContidoNãoContido* exhibition's team strove to make museum-goers aware of the need for critical but positive deconstruction of the "reverence of a forced nature" with which museums are frequently regarded.

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