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An Introduction to the Sociological Art
Context

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From Graffiti to CIURBI: An Introduction to the Sociological Art Context

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The following paper introduces theoretical-practical PhD research that seeks to reflect on and to contribute to sociological theory, extending it by building a new concept (the word *ciurbi*). The thesis is developed from the practice and observation of *ciurbi*, urban interactive cyber-interventions. This research is conducted in the *Programa de Pós-Graduação em Artes Visuais* PPG-Arte of *Universidade de Brasília* with *MídiaLab* team, and part of it (12 months) are based at the University of Plymouth in the *Transtechology* Research group.

The research is based on the author's experience with graffiti writers and involvement in graffiti practice, it uses testimonies and reflections on the social status of graffiti writers who build intricate tactics of identity and routine management. The work is also based on the author's experience of collaborating with artist-programmers and programmer-artists from *MídiaLab*, and resulting in a final report on the production of a number of artworks and reflections on the medium of digital graffiti.

The artistic practice on which the thesis is based are interactive urban cyberinterventions (referred to in the project as *ciurbi*). The name *ciurbi* comes from the first project of this kind developed in *MídiaLab*, under the title *1#.Ciurbi*. The *ciurbis* use digital technology including locative media, and also feature a relationship to electroacoustic sound. During the development of this research the word *ciurbi* became a category, used to refer to any urban intervention that utilizes interactive projection on architecture. Beside the development of these practical artworks, workshops were also conducted in order to allow people to realize their own *ciurbis*.

In what sense are the *ciurbis* different from traditional graffiti? This question is discussed through some ideas of Sociological Art. To

execute the artistic practice of this thesis the *MídiaLab* team uses the methodology of Sociological Art, created by artists Hervé Fischer, Fred Forest, and Jean-Paul Thénot in 1975. However, the team update this methodology to current Brazilian context.

The term cyberintervention comes from the combination of the words cybernetic and intervention. Cybernetics is the science which takes for its object the regulation and communication in living organisms and machines. The word intervention has its origin in *inter-venire*, which means being in between; intervene. Thus, it is worth noting that the aspects present in the etymology of the term intervention should be considered in relation to art that occupies urban space and seeks to modify it, and in the case of this research, to reduce social differences.

This art practice shares characteristics with the author's previous master's research, which included activities related to urban intervention and the use of photography and video as a means of recording these activities. The methodology of the theoretical part of the research uses concepts defined during the practice, building relationships with the field of media art in general, and specifically with computer art. The concepts emerging from the practical



Ciurbi Geopartitura (2012). Brasília - DF

procedures are checked by the theory and are tested again in practical trials. The results are three main ciurbis: *1#Ciurbi* (2010), *Sound-Id* (2011) and *Geopartitura* (2012); art works that propose a particular approach to aspects of urban intervention.

The theoretical approach is simultaneous to the production of the object of study, the ciurbi interventions, so the research is open to a constant review. The artistic practice is embedded in the context of computer art, which in this context is understood as all artistic production that uses computer technologies in the construction of meaning. The practice is understood as a work in progress, the artwork is understood as a process, unfinished. Therefore, when we approach the term artwork, we always understand these activities as works in process, with an emphasis on constant becoming, re-

quiring the actions of the public who interact with the work to make it happen.

According to Renato Cohen (1998), the relationship between participants and artists is a dynamics of complicity and complementarity, because the artwork is established in flux and operates with a large number of open variables, generating new possibilities. In this case, the product is entirely dependent on the process, and it is permeated by risk, by alternations of creators and participants and, above all, by the vicissitudes of the process (p. 18).

In summary, the artistic practice on which the research is based seeks to use media such as computer and multimedia projection to intervene in urban areas and propose interactivity, and photography and video as a means of document these actions. In this research, the



Ciurbi Geopartitura (2012). Brasília - DF

actions are performed using the methodology of sociological art, updated to the current Brazilian context.

To understand this research, first, we can suggest that the intention of the MídiaLab team making ciurbis follows a utopian ideal. This ideal can be seen to be expressed in the working methodology of MídiaLab.

In Greek *topos* means place and the prefix *u* tends to be used with negative meaning, so that *utopia* means no place or nowhere. Bronislaw Baczko (1978) indicates that a *utopia* is the imagined representation of a society opposed to existing. This representation can be seen as one of the possibilities of the real society, and through its contrast with, reveal negative aspects of the actual society.

As a form of sociological art, the *ciurbi* is an artwork presented in urban space, different from traditional forms of art that usually can be seen in galleries and museums. In this case, the passers-by see the *ciurbi* during their usual journeys and their experience with the artwork is influenced by the surprise of casual encounter. The MídiaLab team's idea is to modify social behaviors, in other words, waking the 'damped' perceptions of passers-by.



To understand the relation between *ciurbi* and the urban space we also need to consider that *ciurbis* also include elements of play. The playground of the *ciurbi* is the public space. This moment of play can remain in the participant's memory, they can keep this experience in mind each time they are in that place and this can bring them new ideas about their city. This appropriation of the urban space, the feeling of belonging, the will to participate and the confidence in the city can help people to make urban modifications. These feelings can be important to the future of the city and to the renovation of urban spaces.

The MídiaLab team's idea, that the *ciurbi* can improve the relationship between participants and their cities, indicates a utopian goal: that of the possibility of building a new society. The goal of making the *ciurbi* is that of building an imagined and perfect society, by proposing a critique of the existing society. It offers the vision of a future society created by the abolition of the negative elements of the existing society (as oppression, exploitation, domination, inequality, injustice) and the development of its positive elements (scientific and technical knowledge, arts). As Baczko (1978) indicates, the key is that the *utopia* can be only possible when we consider a new society.



Ciurbi Geopartitura (2012), Areia – PB

According to Baczkó (1978), utopy is a discourse whose boundaries are mobile, but the important thing is that this discourse is not a program of action, but an exercise in imagination. In other words, the utopian is a revolutionary or a reformer conscious of the premature and untimely nature of his ideas: ideas that therefore, may not be offered as a program. As Claude Gilbert Dubois (1968) writes, the utopian discourse remains in the plane of the potential and hypothetical, referring to a possible world that does not carry with it the certainty of its realization. However, he goes on to suggest that utopian discourses can inspire actions or a practiced utopy. Thus, the practiced utopy meets the idea of activism.

As a form of sociological art, the ciurbi can be considered as an artistic, activist action. This is because the ciurbi is computer graffiti, which aims to modify social behaviors, in other words, waking the 'damped' perceptions of passers-by.

The ciurbis are made with the intention of bringing contributions to society, even if the

contributions are imaginary rather than concrete, since we can redefine meaning and possibilities and break boundaries, representing the problems of contemporary society in a symbolic fashion.

The word activism indicates the policy or action of using a campaign to bring about change. In the artistic sense it can be described as any work that privileges the actual practice of transformation of social behaviors at the expense of purely speculative activity.

We find similar ideas in the work of Atkinson and Hammersley (1994). They believe that to understand the world they wish to study, they must actively participate rather than just observe, a method known as 'participant observation'. Based on active participation in the development and implementation of ciurbis, this research performs an analysis of collected data (photographs and videos), as well as the author's observations of the process of creating ciurbis and the resulting interactions between the public and the art work.



Ciurbi Geopartitura (2012), Areia – PB

This research maintains the possibility of ongoing changes in focus as new data become available. According to Hammersley and Atkinson (1994), in participant research, with the passage of time, the research problem is developed, designed and finally its scope is clarified. In this sense, according to David Silverman (2009), observation as a method is almost self-explanatory: the observer observes, listens and records. In addition to observation, the research is conducted through data collection using questionnaires, photographs and videos.

The research seeks to build reflections that can contribute to sociological theory, extending it by building a new concept (the word *ciurbi*). In summary, taking into account the context of the computer information age and considering the *ciurbi* as an activist artistic action, the research question is: how does teamwork take place in *MídiaLab*? How is the teamwork in *MídiaLab* different from the teamwork of traditional graffiti? This comparison is made to understand the methodology of work of the *MídiaLab* team.

The thesis will be verified through: a) development, production and execution of *ciurbis*, b) documentation of these actions, c) data collection and interviews, and d) analysis of the results. Questionnaires were distributed during *ciurbis* that took place on the 17th to 24th of August in Amazonas (Manaus, Itacoatiara e Barcelos), 14th to 21st of September in Alagoas (Maceió, Arapiraca e Palmeira dos Índios), and 20th to 28th of October in Paraíba (João Pessoa, Campina Grande e Areia).

Considering the *ciurbi* as an artistic, activist action, the questionnaires were intended to document the interaction of the public with the artworks. There are several tactics that can be used the design of questionnaires, so an analysis was made of the object of study to identify the most appropriate tactic. The chosen approach was the multiplechoice questionnaire, a dichotomous questionnaire with yes / no answers. It was chosen for speed in data collection, because the *ciurbis* take place in open public spaces and thoroughfares, the participants do not have the time and comfort needed to provide indepth, discursive answers.



Ciurbi Som-Id (2011), Brasília – DF

With these questionnaires we wanted to understand whether the ciurbis can modify in realtime the daily lives of citizens by creating sites for interaction and collaboration.

The thesis begins by defining the main terms used in the research, beginning with the concept of activism, and exploring the ideas of urban space, urban art, graffiti, and urban intervention. In the following section, the concept of urban intervention is discussed, with an emphasis on graffiti art and the example of 1#.Ciurbi. The text focuses on the subject of graffiti in Brazil, graffiti and technology, and uses the artwork *1#.Ciurbi* as an example of digital graffiti.

The third section discusses urban intervention and digital media, with an emphasis on the ciurbi Som-Id. It begins with an explanation

of the process of creating ciurbis; and the question of transdisciplinarity in this context. It then discusses urban intervention as an appropriation of space, and the ciurbi Som-Id. In the fourth section, locative media is discussed as a tool for electroacoustic sound, using the ciurbi Geopartitura as an example and presenting the results obtained from the questionnaires.

The fifth section discusses the educational plan conducted the in ciurbi workshops. Beginning with a reflection on the transdisciplinary process of creating the ciurbi artworks and its influence on the educational process of the workshops, it then goes on to deal more specifically with the workshops, with an emphasis on the importance of technology in education.

As examples, the text includes testimonies about the process and procedures for the crea-



1#.Ciurbi (2010), Taguatinga – DF

tion and execution of each ciurbi created by the MídiaLab team chronologically, with emphasis (in the second, third and fourth sections of the thesis) on the main artworks: 1#.Ciurbi, *Som-Id*, and *Geopartitura*. From this perspective, we identify the defining aspects of the production of ciurbis. Also, we mention artworks from other artists, to present their entanglements with the practice of MídiaLab.

The ciurbis are made with the intention of bringing contributions to society, even if they are imaginative contributions, they offer the ability to modify meanings and create possibilities, break boundaries and think differently, and represent problems in a symbolic way. Therefore, artwork can operate in society in the way people feel, think and act. It offers the potential for connections to be created between art and different spheres of life to make possible experimental, artistic, scientific, social, utopian and activist activities.

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