

## CONTEMPORARY PUBLIC ART IN BRAZIL: THE EXAMPLE OF THE MERCOSUL BIENNIAL

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Public Art in large and medium-sized Brazilian cities exists in conditions very similar to those of the other major cities in Latin America. They are works produced from the 19<sup>th</sup> century to the present, with a preponderance of sculpture that, obviously, relates to the various cultural periods of the respective countries. However, the languages of these works and the training of their authors are practically the same. Most of the artists came from European backgrounds, had received strict academic training, and had emigrated to the new continent in search of a better life, producing groups of commemorative statues, decorative sculptures and functional works (fountains). The works demonstrate the various political, ideological and cultural leanings of the different nations, commissioned by the ruling classes in a desire to create their own traditions. But one type of work featured specifically in Brazil in relation to the other Latin American regions, and this is the new cultural heritage, the mark of the present: permanent, contemporary outdoor works.



The first work in Brazil that we understand today as “public sculpture” started to be produced in 1796 and is a feature of Brazilian Baroque art. This is the group of Prophet statues, by the famous Antônio Francisco Lisboa, “Aleijadinho”, in Congonhas in the state of Minas Gerais. It was completed in 1805, at the Santuário do Senhor Bom Jesus de Matosinhos, which is now a UNESCO World Heritage site. One connection we can make between this first work of public art and contemporary Brazilian outdoor art is that the Prophets were produced for a pre-existing space, the Santuário forecourt, which was not planned to house the sculptures. Current public sculpture

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occupies the urban environment in the same way, being designed and produced for pre-existing spaces. This happens because town-planning projects in Brazil have not envisaged artworks as elements in their development. Nevertheless, since the 1970s, contemporary art has gradually been finding a place in urban regeneration projects, historical centres and depressed areas in some Brazilian metropolises. The first example in this context was the Sculpture Garden created with the renovation of the Praça da Sé in the heart of São Paulo in 1978, with works by the leading Brazilian artists at the time. Another example is the Parque da Catacumba Sculpture Garden in Rio de Janeiro the same year, in a space formerly occupied by a shantytown and also showing works by important artists, including foreigners like Alexander Calder.

In the 1990s, sculpture gardens – which involve no more than a simple shift of the artist's work from the studio to an outdoor location – started to be replaced by artworks designed specifically for pre-determined spaces, taking into account the physical and symbolic characteristics of these spaces. The renovation of the centre of Rio de Janeiro in 1996 resulted in installation of site-specific sculptures by artists like Amilcar de Castro, Ivens Machado and Waltercio Caldas. Porto Alegre, the capital of the state of Rio Grande do Sul, was only given its first sculpture garden in 1997 on an initiative of the 1<sup>st</sup> Mercosul Visual Arts Biennial (1997). The curatorial project for the 5<sup>th</sup> edition of this event included a module of commissioning four permanent site-specific works.



*Amilcar Castro*



Paulo Marcelo Nitche

One of the features of this Biennial is that it does not have its own exhibition space. It uses pre-existing public and private museum spaces and also occupies buildings adapted for exhibition use especially for the show. This is also why the Biennial has been organizing temporary and permanent outdoor works over the years. It is precisely because of this type of activity that a special relationship has grown up between the event and its host city, Porto Alegre. The 4<sup>th</sup> Mercosul Biennial gave the city a public sculpture by Saint Clair Cemin. For the 5<sup>th</sup> edition, the curators invited artists experienced in making works for the urban environment to design permanent works, with ideal schedule and budget conditions, which is rare in a country like Brazil. The artists faced a common challenge: to design a work for a specific place, the Guaíba lakeside, on an area formed by recent landfill at an important part of the lake. With the creation of this artificial shoreline the city had gained a public park and government buildings. The area features a flood prevention dyke at the lakeside and the artists were to use the space between this barrier and the water. This area, which would be highly esteemed in any city valuing tourism and quality of life, has never had a significant planning or landscaping project, leaving it to the sculptures to add a symbolic value to the *site* and helping to transform it into a *place*.

All the projects ended up involving the city's main natural phenomenon, the Lake Guaíba sunset. Two works were placed on the dyke and two on the lower level, at the waterside. Carmela Gross (São Paulo, 1946) designed a sculpture entitled *Cascata*, which is a transposition of planes between the upper and lower levels, similar to a stairway, as a way of breaking the monotony of the line of the dyke. The work consists of sixteen irregular-shaped, juxtaposed concrete slabs ("steps"), about 21 m long by 20 cm high. The sculpture conforms to the curators' idea that the work could also be "used" by the public, either for pleasure or functionally, allowing people to look at the sunset in a different way and also using it as a privileged setting for tasting the typical gaucho drink, the *chimarrão*.



*Carmela\_Gross*

Mauro Fuke (Porto Alegre, 1961) used 648 granite-topped concrete blocks, in three different modules. Each block varied in height to a maximum of one metre. Passers-by on the top of the dyke are able to see that the shape of the group resembles a helix. This arrangement raises up the topography under a stone cover of various heights. The public uses the structure as benches, and its proximity to the shore enables the almost unknown sound of the ripples of the lake to lend a bucolic feel to the work.



*Mauro Fuke*

Espelho Rápido, by Waltercio Caldas (Rio de Janeiro, 1946), refers both to the mirror of water of the lake and the mirror of the “base”, a platform of almost translucent slabs of white granite. Two disparate elements – stainless steel tubes and basalt boulders – dialogue with each other on the four subtle levels of this structure. The artist says that the “speed” needed by the eye to contemplate the sculpture was one of the themes of the work. As the work was installed on the lower level, there is a privileged view of the sculpture and its context from the top of the dyke with a background of the lake and the other shore.



*Waltercio Caldas*

The sculpture by José Resende (São Paulo, 1945), entitled *Olhos Atentos*, underwent a more penetrating discussion with the authorities from the start, due to the different usage being proposed for a “public sculpture”.





Jorge Resende

The piece was finally installed on the upper level of the dyke, facing “the horizon that’s drawn there,” as the artist put it. The work consists of a 30-metre suspended steel structure, facing the sunset. This structure is “used” by the public as a viewpoint for a new – and unusual – panoramic view of the surroundings. At the same time, it allows people to test the strength and intrinsic tension of the balance of a 22-tonne structure with their own bodies. To give a better sensation of the structural aspect, the work was tilted upwards by 8°. It was also turned 13° towards the south in relation to the line of the dyke.

Olhos Atentos also brings in another issue: discussion of the public’s behaviour in relation to a work of art. After the sculpture was opened, groups of teenagers decided to explore to the maximum the balance the work was obliged to have. This sector of the public would jump forcefully on the work every day until the structure developed an excessive vibration. By disobeying the notices that it was forbidden to do this on the sculpture they put other users at risk. It was not long, therefore, before the structure was closed. Public notices, like the signs indicating the capacity of elevators, or not passing “the yellow line” in the metro, which are common in everyday life, were put to the test on a work of art. It seems that the public effectively does not accept such rules for constructions of an artistic nature. Because of this, the use of the sculpture was reassessed and it even had to be modified, which the artist accepted. To reduce the balance, 5.5 metres were cut from the end of the sculpture and a support was added at the foundations, which was the more visible interference with the sculpture.

Designed for the life of the community it belongs to, the existence or otherwise of José Resendé’s extraordinary sculpture was decided by negotiation about the – appropriate or otherwise – use of the work. This work is proof that public art has great meaning for us. Such objects are mechanisms that can activate several debates about how the public space is dealt with, what political and ideological controls operate there, and how the individual circulates within that space. In this respect the group of permanent works from the Mercosul Biennial has important lessons to teach us. It is to be hoped that this example will contribute to the construction of a more effective public policy for commissioning permanent works of art in the Brazilian urban environment.

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