TOWARDS AN AESTHETICS OF POVERTY: ARCHITECTURE AND THE NEO-AVANT-GARDE IN 1960S BRAZIL

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Introduction

The pretext of this essay is a comparison between the neo-avant-garde, as it appears in Peter Bürger’s writing, and Brazilian architecture between the years 1960 and 1970. I should start by saying that such a comparison is mostly academic. The architects I cite – Vilanova Artigas, Sérgio Ferro, Flávio Império, and Rodrigo Lefèvre, all connected with the Faculty of Architecture and Urbanism at the University of São Paolo (FAU-USP) – had no interest in whether or not they constituted a neo-avant-garde, even if they had heard of the term, which I doubt. At the time, they cared little for Europe and European architecture, while their hostility to the United States knew no limits. Outside of Brazil their work had little purchase, not aided by their own xenophobic Marxism, and their country’s profound insularity after a military coup in 1964.¹ These were the anos de chumbo or ‘lead years’, during which a large part of Brazil’s cultural elite decamped, en masse, to Paris. The discussion does not therefore have a promising basis.

That it is worth having at all depends on the comparison I make between this architecture, and certain practices in the European neo-avant-garde, namely Arte Povera. In each case, what I will term an ‘aesthetics of poverty’ is in operation. There was no exchange between the two sides, but they employed remarkably similar ideas (albeit in different contexts) and shared similar prejudices. However, they enjoyed quite different fates. Put crudely, Arte Povera was quickly recuperated by the category of ‘art’ and illustrates Bürger’s thesis about the ineffectiveness of the neo-avant-garde (Bürger 1984: 58). The architects, by contrast, increasingly eschewed art in favour of social action, and paid the price. The comparison is worth making in
the context of this volume, because it shows that ostensibly similar neo-avant-garde practices can have quite different outcomes or effects. Once the concept of the neo-avant-garde moves beyond New York, or Paris, or Cologne, it arguably ceases to make much sense. But equally, it might be said that away from these centres, neo-avant-garde type activity can have real political effect.

On the aesthetics of poverty

Let me say something first about an ‘aesthetics of poverty’. By this I mean the acceptance of the impact that limited availability of materials might have on form, or to put it another way, the futility of trying to approximate the finish of the cultural products of the developed world when the materials to make them may be absent. This idea underpins numerous concepts of art of the 1960s; I will discuss two of the better-known cases here, first Arte Povera, and then the Brazilian film director Glauber Rocha’s ‘Aesthetics of Hunger’, a concept which had much appeal in Brazil beyond cinema (Rocha 1965).

‘Arte Povera’ first came to (limited) public attention in Genoa in September 1967 as the title of one of two simultaneous exhibitions of sculpture curated by an ambitious young critic, Germano Celant. Celant explained what he meant in more detail in the November 1967 edition of a new Roman magazine of contemporary art, Flash Art (Celant 1967). Arte Povera was not so much art, he claimed, but a form of “guerrilla warfare” against the “system” (Celant 1967: 3). The problem with capital, he complained, was that it forced individuals (particularly artists) to assume identities which they then wore like straightjackets. To use a different metaphor, they were doomed to perform a set role until they expired. Rather than accept this, he argued, artists should resist by refusing set identities, and become more like guerrilla fighters. The guerrilla was, he wrote, “capable of choosing his places of battle”, he could “surprise” and “strike”, he had distinct advantages “conferred by mobility” (Celant 1967: 3). The key tactic in this battle was the conscious adoption of poor artistic materials, contingent on their surroundings. This was a self-conscious identification with poverty, but it was also a geographical identification in that Celant’s Italy had yet to achieve the level of development reached by other parts of Europe, let alone the United