SYSTEMS AND FEEDBACK: CILDO MEIRELES’S *INSERTIONS INTO IDEOLOGICAL CIRCUITS*, 1970—ONGOING

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DISSERTATION

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Abstract

In 1970, Brazilian artist Cildo Meireles began a series of artworks, commonly grouped under the title *Insertions into Ideological Circuits*, which has since become emblematic of a Latin American art often termed “ideological conceptualism.” This dissertation problematizes the limits of this terminology in shaping the readings of the *Insertions into Ideological Circuits* by offering detailed analyses of what the *Insertions* series is, how it operates, where it was first publicly received and what the impact of its exhibition was for different audiences. The main argument of this dissertation is that the *Insertions* series uses the notion of a system as its medium, and in so doing, seeks to question two interconnected systems: the system of art and the capitalist system. To support this argument, this dissertation draws from preexisting scholarship to offer analysis of the reproducibility and circulation of the projects in the art world as well as to demonstrate how language plays a significant role in the operation of the series as a system in and of itself. To further provide bases for my argument, I have used an investigative methodology that includes interviews with Meireles, the art critic Frederico Morais, as well as other Brazilian art historians. I have also examined archival materials including unpublished correspondences, periodical articles and criticism available at the Museum of Modern Art’s Archives, the International Center for the Arts of the Americas’ Digital Archive at the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston and Meireles’s personal papers. I argue that the notion of circuit, which first appeared in Meireles’s writings and projects between 1970 and 1975, is decisively associated with the notion of system. As a system in operation, the *Insertions* series engages in, and assimilates feedback from, its first occurrence. This dissertation explores some of the different contexts in which the general schema of *Insertions* was realized—notably, the exhibitions INFORMATION and *Agnus Dei* in addition to publications— and addresses some of
the feedback and the disputes in the art world regarding the categorization and legitimation of the
*Insertions* series produced in the wake of conceptualism. By offering the first comprehensive study of the *Insertions* series in its historical specificity, this dissertation paradoxically allows us to understand how the *Insertions* series continues to operate today as a feedback system within the work of contemporary artists in Brazil.
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INTRODUCTION

Brazilian artist Cildo Meireles has become a crucial figure within international histories of conceptual art. Meireles produced a series of artworks that became emblematic of the art produced in Latin America. Meireles’s work, *Inserções em Circuitos Ideológicos* [*Insertions into Ideological Circuits*]\(^1\) condensed issues that are crucial to developments in contemporary art, particularly art understood as a system and the debates around the systems of art.

Nevertheless, to this date, the developments of Meireles’s *Insertions* in the art world have not been extensively studied. There are very few books exclusively written about Meireles’s work.\(^2\) Those that do exist are usually catalogues from exhibitions with articles about specific artworks. These catalogues present the artist’s explanations of his work as self evident, following

\(^1\) The first version of the *Coca-Cola Project* was written in Portuguese. Only after 1973, Meireles created the English version, which is quoted here from Guy Brett, ed. *Cildo Meireles* (London: Tate Publishing, 2008) 64. (Nota bene: All Portuguese text and quotations have been translated into English by the author unless otherwise indicated. The INFORMATION exhibition at the Museum of Modern Art in New York, in 1970, will be referred to as INFORMATION—all capital letters).

a model of curatorial work, which rarely critiques or problematizes the work under exhibition. Acknowledging this lack of historicization about the beginnings of what became known as Brazilian contemporary art, recently, more scholars have written about the artist in dissertations, theses, and articles. Among the various texts that discuss Meireles’s work, two were particularly helpful for contextualizing the artist’s production in this present research. These texts—more precisely two dissertations—are both dissertations developed from 1970s articles spread in different anthologies of artists’ and art critics’ writings. The first one, written by Marco Antonio Pasqualini de Andrade, “Uma Poética Ambiental: Cildo Meireles, 1963–1970,” focuses on the early work of Meireles, which concentrated on spatial notions, and how the prospect of Brasília was articulated in the artist’s activities in the Experimental Unit of the Museum of Modern Art in Rio de Janeiro. The second text, written by Arthur Freitas, “Contra-Arte: Vanguarda, Conceitualismo e Arte de Guerrilha—1969–1973,” argues that the term guerrilla art references the depletion of vanguard practices in the national context. In fact, the former dissertation describes the artist’s production before his move to Rio de Janeiro and the latter soon after he arrived in this city in the early 1970s.³

The time period this dissertation concentrates on is in the 1970s, when Meireles, while living in Rio de Janeiro, took empty Coca-Cola bottles and banknotes out of circulation, etched messages on them such as “Yankees Go Home!” and reinserted them back into the consumer economy. On the empty bottles—alongside these incendiary messages meant to contest U.S. imperialism that was propagated by companies such as Coca Cola—Meireles etched the project’s

title, *Inserções em Circuitos Ideológicos* [Insertions into Ideological Circuits]. Below the title, he stated his intent with regards to the project through the following instructions: “Gravar informações e opiniões críticas nas garrafas e devolve-lá à circulação” [To register informations and critical opinions on bottles and return them to circulation.] This seemingly simple gesture, of circulating critical opinions through the very channels that establish the power structure those messages oppose, marked the beginning of a line of inquiry that occupied Meireles for the next forty years.

The main argument put forth by scholars regarding the *Insertions* series is that the *Coca-Cola Project* (Figure 1) refers to a strategic resistance to the military dictatorship and public participation in Brazil’s fate. Three curators and art critics were instrumental in the dissemination of this interpretation in the international art world after 1993: Mari Carmen Ramírez, Paulo Herkenhoff, and Okwui Enwezor. Ramírez’s “Blueprints Circuits: Conceptual Art and Politics in Latin America” was published on the occasion of an exhibition, *Latin American Artists of the Twentieth Century*, which occurred in 1993 at the Museum of Modern Art, New York. Ramírez’s work seeks to create specificity for the type of conceptual art that was being developed in Latin America in the 1960s and 1970s. According to the author, the “conceptual ideology” of Latin

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Americans derives from a multitude of inversions of American conceptual art, which she believes stems from how artists of the 1950s and 1960s responded to the artistic legacy of Marcel Duchamp.

According to Ramírez, the artists Robert Rauschenberg, Jasper Johns, Andy Warhol, and Jim Dine, who were each in turn influenced by the bottom of Marcel Duchamp’s readymade, inspired Latin American artists with their irreverent questioning of abstract formalism and their willingness to employ mass culture materials and symbols in their artwork. However, the creation of military dictatorships in almost every country in the region interrupted the flow of enthusiasm and experimental freedom prematurely adopted by Latin American artists. Authoritarianism and the repressive regimes of military governments established a general state of oppression which became the common ground for artists to think as stakeholders in an unwanted political reality. Within this context, readings of Duchamp’s readymades thus served to give new meaning to the appropriated objects, revealing the ideology connected to the objects (not simply extolling them as commodities). The appropriation of day-to-day objects was mainly aimed at revealing the repressive social sphere in which they were inserted. Ramírez illustrates her argument in regards to Latin American artists with Meireles’s Coca-Cola Project, among others, when she writes that the artists had rewritten “meaning on the marketable object. Thus, the readymade, as employed by artists, goes beyond the pop fetishization of the object, transforming it into a driver of political meanings in a specific social context.”

The question that follows from Ramírez’s claim is: What was the specific context in which the Coca-Cola Project


6 Ramírez, “Tactics for Thriving on Adversity,” 158.
and the Banknote Project arose? The position and strength of Ramírez’s interpretation of the Coca-Cola Project depends upon a small diversion in the course of events surrounding Meireles’s conceptualization of the project. The Coca-Cola Project was conceived for INFORMATION at New York’s Museum of Modern Art (MoMA). As this research shall demonstrate, Meireles sought to circulate information that countered the ideology of consumption in the context of the American museum. The project was not designed exclusively for Brazilians, nor did it merely emerge from the artist’s participation in the exchange of silkscreened bottles at supermarkets.

Therefore, Ramírez’s version of Latin American art, which is strongly influenced by political anti-dictatorship bias, is not sufficient to understand what “context” means to Meireles. While she argues that context is something local within the national boundaries, Meireles states that the art world’s issues involve problems of interaction between nations and broader ideologies.\(^7\) In this sense, “contextualization,”\(^8\) a category that Ramírez uses to define Latin American art, does not seem to include political issues at the international level.

Paulo Herkenhoff’s interpretation, put forward in the catalogue of the Meireles’s solo exhibition at the New Museum in the United States and at the Museum of Modern Art in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil (1999), is likewise lacking accuracy. Herkenhoff also obscures the interpretive implications of Meireles’s project because he dismisses the fact that Meireles’s project was conceived for INFORMATION. In “A Labyrinthine Ghetto: The work of Cildo Meireles,”

\(^7\) Paulo Herkenhoff, Gerardo Mosquera, Dan Cameron, eds., Cildo Meireles (London: Phaidon, 1999), 135.

\(^8\) Ramírez, “Blueprints Circuits,” 556.
Herkenhoff claims that the procedure Meireles used to make the work removes it from the art world. Herkenhoff states the following:

[…] These ‘readymades’ thus remained within their existing social circuits, rather than being removed into the ‘art’ circuit. […] the Insertions are a manifestation within a real economic activity: in this case, the radically modified Coca-Cola bottle is inserted into the reality of an existing economic system.

Meireles proposal in the Insertions … could be compared, on a political level, to the Brazilian guerrilla leader Carlos Marighella’s underground strategies of guerrilla warfare: grassroots-level street actions in response to the web of repression. Meireles, too, precipitates confrontation in capitalist spaces and their systems of exchange. In 1970, Marighella wrote, ‘Street tactics are used to fight the enemy in the streets, utilizing the masses against him […] By the same token, it is important to know how to respond to the police network […] This urban guerrilla operation is called the “network within the net”.’

As a guerrilla tactic, Insertions into Ideological Circuits are models of symbolic action in significant social systems. Coca-Cola bottles or banknotes represent actual systems of circulation of information, here enabling the clandestine tactical action of political resistance to take place.9

This passage portrays the Coca-Cola Project as a political campaign within Brazilian society. Moreover, Herkenhoff’s assertion encourages the following interpretation: Meireles’s work represents effective public participation in the reproduction of the object as an alternative means of communication within the space of guerrilla warfare. This reading may suggest that the work is associated with political movements—and that Meireles’s practices existed within the context of political activism. These ideas, however, never became explicit in Meireles’ activities. Meireles was not engaged in any guerrilla movement, nor is there evidence in newspapers of the time that the bottles were used for this purpose. Despite Herkenhoff’s compelling analysis, and the fact that he was a peer of Meireles and influenced many authors, some of the Coca-Cola bottles silkscreened by Meireles were replaced with new soft drink bottles in Rio de Janeiro (in

9 Herkenhoff, et al., Cildo Meireles, 48.
the industrial recycle system) only three years after they were displayed at INFORMATION. Moreover, those new bottles were featured in another exhibition, *Aguns Dei*, at the Petite Galerie in Brazil.\(^\text{10}\) In other words, they were first introduced to audiences in museums and galleries. The *Coca-Cola Project* and the *Banknote Project*, we must acknowledge, were in their initial conception projects that entailed insertion into the art world and a critique of capitalistic values intrinsic to Coca-Cola and the dollar symbol. Both these objects are marks of American imperialist expansion that imply American support for the military dictatorships in Latin America, as well as, and less considered by these authors, the American invasion of Vietnam. This means that Meireles’s message could have been directed against American imperialism in different parts of the globe, instead of having been reduced to the Brazilian context only.

The last argument discussed here was made by Okwui Enwezor in a text written in 2008 and presented in 2010 as a lecture at Parsons The New School for Design, entitled, “On the politics of disaggregation: Notes on Cildo Meireles’s *Insertions into Ideological Circuits*.”\(^\text{11}\) Unlike the other authors mentioned previously, Enwezor claims that the *Coca-Cola Project* was Meireles’s response to McShine’s invitation to participate in INFORMATION. He asserts that it was a protest against American interventionist foreign policy conducted by the Nixon administration in order to contain communist expansion throughout the world. Although Enwezor’s argument is closer to the facts, it is still based on the idea that Meireles’s action outside the circuit of art was the most radical aspect of the project. He also contends that displaying it in contemporary exhibitions is a museological procedure of fetishization of the art of 1960s. According to him, the proposal was short-lived and, after its circulation in society, the

\(^{10}\) Oliveira, Cildo Meireles, interview with the author, Rio de Janeiro, March, 2011.

\(^{11}\) Guy Brett, ed. *Cildo Meireles* (London: Tate Publishing, 2008), 68–73. The expanded version of the article is discussed by Enwezor in his lecture at www.youtube.com/watch?v=pPhg6bxD0kU.
object could only be truly presented as an artifact (i.e., as documentation of an action that did not take place when the presentation of the photographed document occurred).

Because Meireles’s named all three projects\(^{12}\) (which were made at different times) the *Insertions* series, Enwezor’s timeline was ambiguous and inconsistent. In reality, as this study shall attempt to show, the *Insertions* series changed with time and accumulated feedback from the initial instructions Meireles produced. At first, Meireles presented the *Coca-Cola Project* at INFORMATION as an object, but he had no time to exchange any Coca-Cola bottles at pubs or supermarkets in Rio de Janeiro before then.\(^{13}\) The *Coca-Cola Project* became prominent in the world because it was institutionalized as an art object that questions the status of art. There was no life to the project before its entry into the institutional space. The same thing happened with the *Banknote Project*, which did not exist before INFORMATION.\(^ {14}\) One of the photographs from the *Insertions* series that Enwezor discusses in his lecture at Parsons the New School for Design is *Insertions into Ideological Circuits: Banknote Project: Who Killed Herzog?* That photograph was taken by Meireles years after INFORMATION, in 1975. It depicts a hand stamping a *Cruzeiro* bill (the name of the Brazilian currency at the time) with the following question: *Who Killed Herzog?* This question was asked by Meireles in an attempt to contradict the official military narrative, that is, that the left-leaning journalist, Vladimir Herzog, had committed suicide in prison. This project operates differently than the *Coca-Cola Project*, however: it represents the most explicit and urgent rebellion against the abuses of those in power.

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\(^{13}\) Oliveira, Cildo Meireles, interview with the author.

\(^{14}\) Ibid.
in Brazil. And this statement compelled art historians to interpret all of Meireles’s projects as political, participatory art directed against the dictatorship.

In a general sense, the *Insertions* series matches the narratives Ramírez, Herkenhoff and Enwezor propose. Nevertheless, these narratives do not encompass crucial characteristics of the project, namely, the project’s own feedback and its recirculation in the art world. This dissertation, therefore, is dedicated to showing that Meireles’s insertions must be read within the context of the systems of art. Accordingly, this research aims to add to the existing scholarship on the *Insertions* series to address these understudied characteristics of the projects.

It would be inadvisable to disregard the many interpretations of the series that characterize it as a guerrilla operation given the fact that Brazil was under a military dictatorship. The repressive regime was an inescapable reality resulting in deplorable events: deaths, incarcerations, censorship, boycotts, and exiles. Moreover, Meireles openly addressed the abusive conduct of the military in *Who Killed Herzog?* (1975) and hinted at political issues as they relate to the power dynamics between citizens and government.

Furthermore, at the time Ramírez was writing, art historians were in the process of creating a continental version of the conceptual art produced in Latin America under the categorization of “ideological conceptualism”\(^{15}\) as a means of promoting peripheral artworks in

\(^{15}\) Mari Carmen Ramírez, “Blue Print Circuits,” 550. According to Ramírez, the first author to coin the term *ideological conceptualism* was the Spanish art historian Simón Marchán Fiz. The adoption of the term by Ramírez to champion Latin American art was questioned by authors such as Zanna Gilbert in her article, “Ideological Conceptualism and Latin America: Politics, Neoprimitivism and Consumption,” *Rebus/ a Journal of Art History & Theory*, Issue 4 (Autum/Winter 2009). Gilbert argues that the way Ramírez and Luis Camnitzer applied the term could implicate a reactivation of primitivism and consumption of “otherness” in a new format. In another article, Miguel López asserts that Fiz was claiming Spanish and Argentine art was marginalized, which makes the appropriation of the term in the context of Latin American art reductive and inaccurate. For more information, see Miguel A. López, “How Do We Know What Latin American Conceptualism Looks Like?” *Afterall*, Issue 23 (Spring 2010).
mainstream art institutions. Paradoxically, insinuation into the mainstream occurred after Latin American art production was presented as an isolated group in the international art scene. This does not mean that artists in Latin America were not interested in dialogue with the international art world or that they were only concerned with regional versions of conceptual art, as perhaps the argument of Ramírez may suggest. On the contrary, Meireles intended his work to have a global reading, although commentators have interpreted his series as an expression of regionalism. Interestingly enough, the otherness of Latin American art was embraced at the same time that major institutions opened up debates about art historicization, which allowed the contribution of otherwise invisible artists from Latin America. Despite substantial evidence supporting the interpretation of the *Insertions* series as subversive, this dissertation revisits the facts anew.


To investigate Meireles’s *Insertions* series, this research faced the problem of finding an adequate framework in which the series could be understood and analyzed beyond the findings of earlier scholars, critics and curators. Although this dissertation uses some of the common assertions about the series, it prioritizes the definition of an open system on its analyses, since the raw materials Meireles appropriated to compose his projects (Coca-Cola bottles, banknotes, coins, and newspapers) depend upon a common platform: systems of distribution. Thus, it is necessary to understand what a system is in order to comprehend the way a system distributes
services, information, and goods in society. The target of Meireles’s criticism is the unequal accessibility of citizens to these systems of distribution. Overall, the notion of systems is a useful framework to assess the intentions of the project, the medium of the series, the series’ recirculation in different systems of distribution, and, most important, the feedback the series triggers. Drawing from Francis Halsall’s interpretation of systems theory, the definition of an open system therefore provides a new perspective to understand the series as a whole in an ongoing project.

In essence, this dissertation argues that Meireles’s Insertions series is a project developed in consonance with the thinking of the time with regards to systems, and more specifically, with the problem of the multiple meanings of the term. The different and competing uses of the term systems in a variety of disciplines transformed the definition of the term from the late 1940s through the 2010s: from Nobert Wiener’s cybernetic theory influencing biology and industrial production to systems of information studied in computer science, and from minimalist systems production to new media art using systems of information.

To explore this dissertation’s argument that the Insertions series is a conceptual art project using systems as its reference, one must revisit the exhibitions, including the failed exhibitions, of the time to discover how the conceptual production was informed by the idea of systems and how the parallel between conceptual art and “systems aesthetics” (in the United States or “art systems” (in Argentina) was disputed in the art world. The associations between the notion of systems and conceptual art were largely dismissed by art historians and critics in the 1970s, because systems were seen as complicit with dominant forces. Nonetheless, drawing

16 Francis Halsall, Systems of Art: Art, History and Systems Theory (Oxford: Peter Lang, 2008). Halsall’s book offers the main tool, which is the definition of an open system, to analyze the Insertions series.
from authors such as Luke Skrebowski\textsuperscript{17} and Michael Corris,\textsuperscript{18} a critical component can be rediscovered in the way in which artists were manipulating systems through their works. This means that conceptual practices were influenced by a myriad models within the cultural field, and although conceptual art had been usually related to language, philosophy, publicity, and ideology as models used to interpret its practices, this dissertation’s focus on systems as a model of interpretation in which conceptual practices developed in the 1970s can be both propelled by systems as well as critical of these same systems.

It is important to stress that artists such as Meireles were using the word system quite flexibly when referring to pre-established ideological systems, most prominently, the capitalist system. The capitalist system was many times seen by Meireles as a contradictory system, which, on one hand makes possible the funding of art, and on the other hand, makes funding and recognition difficult to those artists who are not operating inside powerful systems of art. This dissertation addresses the ambivalence and anxiety of Meireles’s enterprise, that is, to use a system as medium of expression which, at the same time, is the very system of distribution that the artist is willing to criticize. This research highlights how Meireles’s critique of the capitalist system is a successful articulation of systems in a conceptual and highly complex project.

\textsuperscript{17} Luke Skrebowski, “Systems, Contexts and Relations: An Alternative Genealogy of Conceptual Art” (PhD diss., Middlesex University, 2009). Skrebowski’s work provided a crucial reference to this dissertation because he argues that conceptual art, at its origin, is a series of complex events situated beyond the language issue. Language is an aspect that many authors insist upon, giving no further interpretations about other conceptual manifestations in a more comprehensive and deeper way.

\textsuperscript{18} Michael Corris, “Recoding of Information, Knowledge and Technology,” in Michael Corris, ed., \textit{Conceptual Art: Theory, Myth and Practice} (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 2004). Michael Corris and Luke Skrebowski remark the critical potential of systems theory used by artists in the 1970s. They affirmed that the expression “the system” was pejoratively used by people to describe the harmful effects or hidden motivations of the capitalist system. This common usage of the expression “the system” was not accounted for by the detractors of Jack Burnham’s critical and curatorial works (further discussion about Jack Burnham is elaborated in the first chapter of this dissertation).
In this sense, the success of the series can be measured by its constant recirculation in the art world as a paradoxical way to criticize the capitalist culture as a whole. The crux of Meireles’s cultural critique lies in the economic, political, and artistic issues involved in the contradictions of capital. As the prevalence of a product, artwork, or form of currency increases, so does the possibility of hijacking its circulation. The notion of circulation is fundamental to capitalism because it is capitalism’s *modus operandi* but it is also the means by which an artist like Meireles can conceptualize his critique. Through a system of circulation, Meireles represents the dominant culture of capitalism *and* undermines it. In *Insertions into Ideological Circuits*, Meireles utilizes monetary and consumer systems by imprinting messages in Coca-Cola bottles and banknotes and returning them to public circulation. Such actions make tangible certain ideological systems, and they also disrupt them. The Coca-Cola bottles were imprinted with messages of dissent, aimed squarely at the governments in the United States and Brazil (including instructions on how to reuse the bottles subversively to make Molotov cocktails in Brazil after 1973, for instance). The banknotes, on the other hand, were also stamped with references to Brazil’s dictatorial government in later versions of the series. Yet Meireles’s *Insertions* were also a means of inserting his practice into an increasingly globalized art world. This dissertation contends that these multiple insertions must be analyzed together.

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19 Felipe Scovino, ed., *Cildo Meireles* (Rio de Janeiro: Beco do Azougue, 2009), 135. In 1997, Meireles stated (in an interview with Len Berg) that 1970 was a turbulent year. He was “more and more conscious of the contradiction between art and profession. Artists don’t become professionals because they cannot systematically repeat the creative act while maintaining a quality standard.”

20 Eve Chiappelo and Luc Boltanski, “The New Spirit of Capitalism,” in “International Journal of Politics, Culture, and Society,” Vol. 18, No. 3/4, *The New Sociological Imagination* (Spring–Summer, 2005): 162. One of the characteristics of capitalism is: “A minimal format stressing the need for unlimited accumulation by pacific means. Capital is cut off from material forms of wealth and can only be increased through continuous reinvestment and circulation. This endows it with a clearly abstract quality that contributes to the perpetuation of the accumulation process.”
Ultimately, this dissertation argues that Meireles’s adoption of consumerist systems defines how the series criticizes capitalism and its ideologies (i.e., the marketing of merchandise and the perception of the world through one’s ability to buy things)—even as it appropriates the same form of movement of goods and capital. And it is this paradox between using the language, objects, and systems that circulate goods and capital to encourage the public to create counter-information within this system that produces the project’s ambivalence. On one hand, Meireles’s project is an affirmation of the imperial aspects of art circulation, industrialization, and currency and on the other hand, it is an attempt to subvert the very order this system produces. The artist intended for the projects to challenge the concentration of control over the art by the art world establishment in both New York and in Brazil. He sought to do this by circulating the objects in an extra-artistic context. And yet, despite the series’ circulation in Brazilian supermarkets, the project primarily gained visibility through its exhibition in an American museum. The ambivalence produced by the circulation of Meireles’s work within these overlapping yet different systems of representation brings to light key contradictions embodied within these divergent systems of exchange. Throughout the series, these ideological systems change and take on different connotations that overlap and confound each other. Works may operate in local and international contexts. They also may operate within the secondary system of art: not-for-profit spaces and magazines—or within the system of more traditional art museums and galleries that Meireles was generally opposed to. After the 1970s, Meireles became increasingly embedded in the international art world.

Another aim of this dissertation is to unveil the connection between the word *circuits* in Meireles’s *Insertions* series title and its similarities with the definition of systems. Meireles’s *Insertions* series has, at its core, the idea of inserting information into *circuits*. But, what are
circuits? For Meireles, circuits are channels of flow of art, money, goods, and ideologies mediated by people. Circuit are like given systems within which people behave and conform. He writes about circuits indicating what the word might mean to him, “referential system, circulation, range.” Indeed, circuit is a noun that often describes a route, an itinerary, a trajectory, an ambit, or a periphery. And in its scholarly uses, the word was mostly associated with electrical engineering to describe a device or an electricity flow in a determinate path. The word circuit might induce readers to associate Meireles’s notion with a closed system, indicating cyclic and self-enclosed operations. However, I argue that the notion of circuit is also indicative of constant movement generated by one or different sources of energy. In other words, a circuit must be propelled by the exchange of energy inside itself and by some kind of source outside its domain. Thus, a circuit works as an open system, even if this characteristic was not elaborated by Meireles at that time he wrote about circuits.

Therefore, this dissertation’s choice to acknowledge the term circuit in the last chapter stems from the rich (although not fully studied) use of the term in Meireles’s work. What circuit describes could be encompassed today in the definition of a dynamic open system described by Halsall, but not without the loss of a critical component addressed to the market and

21 In 1970, Meireles wrote a set of reflections about the word circuit, which is in the appendix of this dissertation.


to the capitalist system presented in Meireles’s series title “ideological circuits.” For that reason, the choice to retain the notion of the circuit in this analysis, instead of exclusively using a systems framework, derives from the critique of capitalism implicit in Meireles’s notion of circuit, which itself is not present in Halsall’s definition of system.24

Consequently, it is a goal of this dissertation to begin to explore the notion of circuit as a burgeoning conceptual problem within the artistic community in Brazil. I argue that the notion of circuit hides prolific meanings to be discovered in Meireles’s practice, as his reflections would influence and inspire the subsequent generation of artists in Brazil to use different systems of art distribution. This dissertation begins to uncover the historical circumstances within which the expression, circuit, appears as a model for intellectuals in Brazil and dares to associate this notion of circuit with the definition of an open system.

In this sense, even though circuit and system can be considered as synonyms, I will use both words when describing the historical contexts at the time they appeared. The word circuit discussed in Meireles’s writings has a historical component that must be acknowledged. In his writings, the notion of circuit does not address in detail the problem with the medium of art, and it does not explain why some artworks keep circulating in the art world, whereas others do not.25

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24 Niklas Luhmann, *Art as a Social System* (Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 2000). Actually, art understood as a social system shares a general foundation with the operations of various mediums. If one examines the thinking of Halsall’s mentor and primary reference, the German philosopher Niklas Luhmann, it is clear that the latter’s model could be applied to describe almost any artwork. Ultimately, Luhmann sees the artwork as a communicative element that comes to life in different mediums.

25 Cauquelin, *Arte Contemporânea*, 56–83. This is the problem I would encounter if I adopted Anne Cauquelin’s notion of contemporary art. She asserts that the art circuit operates under a regime of communication inside which the circulation of the artworks is not restricted to their consumption; rather, the market helps to maintain the circulation of certain artworks in the net system. Of course, in her view, the interest in the artworks is related to how frequently they appear in that net system. Her description of the operations of the net system is very similar to Ronaldo Brito’s description of the mechanisms of
In other words, Meireles’s writings do not explain the feedback principle. Basically, with time, the word circuit became associated with the modes of production and distribution of art in the Brazilian artistic community at that time and therefore must be acknowledged. On the other hand, the notion of system explains the feedback principle. However, if I only use the word system in this dissertation I will dismiss a fundamental contribution of the *Insertions* series, which was to introduce the word circuit as a description of ideological systems in society, including the art world. Thus, the problem of exclusively adopting the definition of system to understand the series is that Meireles’s projects may be read as divorced from historical construction and from the power dynamic at the core of the capitalist system—a most important element of capitalism to Meireles.

According to Meireles, drawing attention to the notion of circuit is the major contribution of the *Insertions*’ series. As mentioned, the series compelled artists and art critics to think about the mechanisms of production and the legitimation of art in Brazil. Meireles and his peers started to systematize actions with the intent of shedding light on the production and distribution of art in the national and international contexts. They unveiled the local limitations in comparison with the speed and stability of the art production and distribution in Europe and United States. What mattered to these artists and intellectuals was how the various elements—the market, the public, and the production—overlapped and influenced each other. In summary, circuit became, after Meireles, a name deployed by his peers to critically describe the art world in the 1970’s,

saturation and the blockage of the Brazilian art circuit in the 1970s. Notwithstanding, for Cauquelin, there is an equalization of all artworks, producers, and knowledge circulating in the net system. Therefore, using Cauquelin’s framework of the art circuit, which appropriates the communication system, would preclude viewing Meireles’s *Insertions* series as a mechanism itself capable of renewed interpretation beyond a generative model. And as I will address later in the dissertation, Meireles’s instruction clearly provokes feedback from other people. Essentially, the recirculation in the systems of art is a key facet of the *Insertions* series that is not found in many other artworks produced at that time.
although the term was not used as a fully structured model by art historians, nor was the term studied by art sociologists at the time.  

Thus, in all chapters of this dissertation, I will sometimes refer to the art world as the *art circuit* and at other times as the *system of art*. Using these terms is a way to relate the former to the contemporaneous writings of Meireles and Ronaldo Brito, and the latter to the definition of art as a social system in Francis Halsall use of the term.

In summary, this dissertation posits that the specificity of Meireles’s series illustrates the fact that his work deals with the multiple meanings of the word *system*, including two meanings not elaborated by Halsall: the cultural critique and the historical moment during which the word was problematized in Brazil. Moreover, the *Insertions* series necessarily produces the feedback element of the medium when the instructions are read, even though feedback is not addressed in Meireles’s analyses of the circuit.

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28 The idea of art as a social system is developed by sociologists such as Niklas Luhmann, Nestor Garcia Canclini and the artists Victor Burgin in his article “Art – Society Systems,” *Control* 4, 1968; and Hervé Fischer in his book *Théorie de L’art Sociologique* (Paris: Casterman, 1977).

29 Despite the fact that the words *systems art* were not frequently used in Brazil during the seventies, the artists were very aware of the multiple meanings implicated in them.

30 Anne Cauquelin, *Arte Contemporânea: Uma Introdução* (São Paulo: Martins, 2005), 83. Though Cauquelin describes the art circuit as a communicative system (coinciding with Luhmann’s idea of art), she does not explains what keep producers interested in certain artworks and what make others lose interest. For her, the art circuit does not have a central or hierarchical organization; whatever is inside the circuit tends to maintain its circulation almost indefinitely. I contend that some artworks, such as Meireles’s *Insertions into Ideological Circuits*, by replicating operations of the art circuit is more likely to be recirculating in the systems of art than other artworks produced in the same time period.
Because the definition of system helps to categorize the art medium, art history, and capitalism as systems interconnected, this dissertation analyzes Meireles’s series through this lens. Nevertheless, this research acknowledges that, at times, some artists and critics seek to separate themselves from an implicit governmental and derogatory connotation of the expression “the system” (which is discussed in the depth in the section Systems in Latin America under Dictatorship of the first chapter). Even though the term system in 1970’s Brazilian context was avoided, and it might spur rejection in the artistic community today, I have chosen in this dissertation to revisit the definition of system, because systems theory offers a more overarching framework to describe the operations of the art world and the medium of the art which Meireles manipulated in his series. Conversely, Meireles’s writings about the notion of circuit do not account for the art medium, and they do not describe the continued circulation of his works or the feedback produced by other people in response to his work. Through the perspective of Meireles’s writings, the Insertions series is only understandable when it first appears; it is only rarely analyzed within the continuum of the proposition’s reappearance. This unpredictable quality of the Insertions series constitutes an element of anxiety within Meireles’s own interpretation of the ensuing versions of his work.

The first chapter of this dissertation begins by establishing the theoretical parameters to define the concept of system and its different subcategories. The conceptualization of what is an open system and its qualities are necessary tools to analyze the Insertions series. Specifically, this chapter paves the way to investigate the notion that the Insertions series operates in multiple and simultaneous systems by questioning the ideologies of the systems of art. The first chapter, Systems, demonstrates that the notion of systems was pervasive among the artistic milieu in both the United States and in Brazil. In the United States, the associations between art and systems
theory were being reinforced by the art critic Jack Burnham as a form of evolution that shifted the traditional into a new mode of artistic practice. Conversely, in Brazil, before the end of the 1960s, systems theory, as proposed by the concrete artists, had been rejected by neoconcrete artists as a means of critiquing the traditional associations of art. Whereas concrete artists replicated systems theory in mass production design, Meireles, almost two decades later, employed the notion of systems to problematize the systems of art distribution. This chapter also investigates the issue of system in the wider Latin American context. It shows the relevant role that the boycott of the XI São Paulo Biennial played in the resistance to the word system in Brazil. Lastly, this chapter investigates Meireles’s first Insertions into Newspapers—works that preceded the famous Insertions into Ideological Circuit series—and the circumstances surrounding the emergence of the artist’s engagement with the concept of the circuit. In particular, this chapter introduces Meireles’s assimilation of systems and the reasons why he resisted adopting the word system in his vocabulary.

The second chapter, Insertions as Operation, analyses the elements and functions of the objects presented by Meireles. In the first section, Marcel Duchamp’s readymade appears as precursor and reference to Meireles’s proposal. Many of the Insertions critics based their arguments on Meireles’s statements about the project and particularly his admiration of Duchamp. Following Duchamp’s idea of a readymade, Meireles repurposed the concept that any industrialized object designated by an artist and presented within the institutional walls of galleries and museums can be considered artwork. By writing two different messages in empty glass bottles of Coca-Cola (that would be refilled with soda by Coca-Cola in a returnable system), Meireles effectively repurposed the original objects. This inversion of Duchamp’s idea—circulating a bottle of Coca-Cola in society as an art object as opposed to bringing an
industrialized object into the museum—highlights a fundamental difference between the two artists. Since we must acknowledge the original context of the Insertions, points of intersections and differentiation between them are activated in this section.

The second chapter also examines what the Insertions do as propositions and interventions. Language is a crucial part of these procedures. The instructions propelling the feedback element of the series are discussed following Liz Kotz’s reflections about conceptual art as a general notational system that produces specific realizations for every context in which it takes place. This study also unfolds the consequences of Kotz’s argumentation implicating the systems of art as a coauthor of the institutional realizations of conceptual artworks.

The third chapter, INFORMATION, describes the exhibition in which Meireles first presented Insertions into Ideological Circuits: Coca-Cola Project and Banknote Project. Due to the nature of Meireles’s projects, an understanding of the varied contexts in which they were presented is imperative to comprehending their function—particularly in the case of the Insertions series. For that reason, the INFORMATION exhibition at the New York Museum of Modern Art in 1970 is the core of this chapter, and some of the artworks and material researched for the exhibition are discussed. The chapter demonstrates that the conceptualization of the exhibition was a paradigm shift in the model of curating and exhibiting conceptual artistic practices at that time.

Meireles’s participation in INFORMATION launched the artist into the international art world. In its first exhibition, his series did not receive public attention. Only later, after 1973, scholars positioned the Coca-Cola Project and the Banknote Project as an act of resistance against Brazil’s military dictatorship and the mobilization of the public sphere through monetary
and commercial systems. This chapter, however, addresses how the Insertions series also worked as an artistic proposal that effectively inserted Meireles himself into the international art context. After all, the speculative, conceptual dimension of the proposal was more comprehensive than the actual circulation of the objects within Brazil’s economy circa 1970. This aspect of the work manifests itself first through the theoretical and speculative debates surrounding the series when it was exhibited at MoMA; and second, through its subsequent exhibition around the world. The internationalization of Meireles’s series is also present through the material appropriation of consumption systems and countries’ currencies as a medium in order to address the collapse of local and international issues in an increasing globalized world.  

The fourth chapter, Feedback, describes the Agnus Dei exhibition in Brazil, which occurred at the same time as INFORMATION in New York. Agnus Dei was curated by Frederico Morais, who was the first critic to create a feedback for the Insertions series. His work A Nova Crítica (1970) and Antonio Manuel’s Isso É Que É (1975) illustrate the feedback principle implicit in the Insertions series. The fourth chapter ends with an investigation into Meireles’s reactions to the feedback principle and how the unpredictable attribute of the series might generate anxiety in the ensuing feedbacks from Meireles with regards to the series.

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31 David Joselit, “Cildo Meireles,” Arfforum International, Vol. 38, No. 6 (February 2000). See also Renato Ortiz, Mundialização e Cultura (São Paulo: Brazilienze, 1994) 7. Among the many authors who have studied globalization, I find Renato Ortiz’s ideas particularly fascinating. Therefore, this study is borrowing the notion that certain operations of world culture happen in an area that lacks a defined territory. In his book, Mundialização e Cultura [Globalization and Culture], Ortiz describes the processes he believes to be at the roots of globalization, showing the “existence of global processes that transcend groups, social classes and nations.” Ortiz’s book deals with globalization as a result of the expansion of capitalism whereby specific cultural values are replaced by universal ones. He explores one of the basic assumptions of capitalism: the expansion of consumer markets—an idea that is not present in the hegemonic notion of a country. And though the United States has acted as a precursor to many models of production and marketing, those models are not employed to bestow reverence upon a supposedly American sovereignty; rather, they are used because they are bound by the logic of the capitalist system.
The fifth chapter, *The Problem of Provincialism*, understands the INFORMATION catalogue as part of the institutional system of art distribution and as a project in which the institutional art world is a coauthor of the art projects displayed by the catalogue. Brazilians’ contributions to the INFORMATION catalogue instigate the debate around the problem of provincialism, which is elucidated by Terry Smith’s article about the subject. This chapter suggests that Meireles’s contribution to the catalogue can be understood as noise in the communication process among members of the art world. The fifth chapter also describes Meireles’s *Insertions into Anthropological Circuits* and of how the projects relate to the artist’s concerns while he was living in New York.

In the sixth chapter, *Insertions Thrive*, the subsequent versions of *Insertions* are analyzed. The next version can be identified in the *Malasartes* magazine where the notion of circuit was first analyzed in Brazil. The notion of circuit discussed by Meireles and Brito within *Malasartes* was a critique of the art world as part of an unfair capitalist system. In retrospect, Meireles said that his main job with the *Insertions* series was to single out the notion of circuit. At that time, he and some of his colleagues of the same generation were thinking about the establishment of the arts in Brazil. Though the global student movement of 1968 had not succeeded in its claims for social change, the artists of Meireles’s generation\(^{32}\) possessed some of the spirit that elevated revolutionary artistic production in Rio de Janeiro. Thus, at first, Meireles’s reflections on the circuit appeared to have a diffuse, anticapitalist, antiestablishment character. Meireles had thought that he could beat the system. Then, by means of comparing readings of circuit in two different articles, this dissertation clarifies what critics and artists incorrectly saw in early 1970’s

\(^{32}\) The *tranca-ruas* [lock-streets] generation, as it was called by Francisco Bittencourt, at Jornal do Brazil in May 9, 1970.
in Brazil as a separate art market whose patrons were an extraneous element of the art world as a whole. In the first analyses of the circuit offered by the art critic Ronaldo Brito, the Brazilian art market—as elite, dominant, militarized force—appears as the circuit itself. Nonetheless, Brito disregarded the fact that the Brazilian market was only one part of the circuit within which the monetary capital was concentrated. Indeed, the circuit was configured by many and different forces. Therefore, the critique of the circuit found in the first writings of Meireles and Brito point to a distinction between public and market, but the intertwined complicities of accumulation of value were dismissed and overlooked by them. At that time, they understood their activities in the art world as countering the art market. Arguably, however, their actions made them integral to a growing, alternative art world in the 1970s that today is the dominant art historical account of the period. This dominant version, as I mentioned earlier, is named “ideological conceptualism”. In the long run, exhibition value (which includes value generated via publications, such as the Malasartes magazine) is tightly connected to the historical value of the artistic experience or practice proposed by artists. Their critique of the circuit demonstrated a problem that, in fact, exceeded the repressive political atmosphere of that time and extended itself to a permanent negotiation with and within the art markets, the institutions, and the public.\footnote{Andrea Fraser, “From the Critique of Institutions to an Institution of Critique,” \textit{Artforum}, 44, No. 1, (2005): 278-283. In this article, Fraser clarifies that the institutionalization of art is built over what each person’s understanding of art is or might be and that art institutions correspond to this view created in conjunction between artists’ production, public opinion and art institutions. According to Fraser, because the institutionalization is inescapable therefore a higher degree of critique is required by all people to decide what kind of institution one might support.}

Starting from 1973—but more pronounced beginning in 1976—after a reflux of the revolutionary impulse in artists, Meireles’s reflections on the circuit changed. The operations of
the circuit were described by Meireles himself and authors such as Carlos Zilio, Ronaldo Brito, José Resende, and Waltércio Caldas in an effort to understand the circuit’s constituent parts. Their descriptions concluded that the market was formed by the art consumers (represented by private or public collectors); the art producers were the performers (artists); and the legitimizing institutions (formed by galleries, museums, and the academy) were the art readers. The public was a broader audience that would not be restricted by its power to buy works of art. Thus, the national art circuit was subsequently understood by artists and editors of Malasartes magazine through the lens of a reformist tendency, which means that the circuit itself would not be a problem in their view. Instead, they considered the general lack of permanent and ideologically committed sponsors of the Brazilian art circuit their major problem. In other words, the biggest criticism lodged against the art circuit on the part of the former editors of Malasartes was that the market, formed by the local bourgeoisie, was not interested in investing in active artists’ work and did not understand its ideological role in promoting art produced in the country. Buyers saw art as investment and refrained from promoting publications or funding events that might engender contemporary readings of the works. This view emerged as a result of the clash between national production and the artistic systems of the developed countries. That is why the process of expansion and the dispossession of the international world—that is, the increase in the number of invitations sent to Brazilians to participate in exhibitions and seminars in art history in the United States in the 1970s, for example—are so important to institutional critique in Brazilian contemporary art. This movement of institutional critique was associated with the word circuit. From the earliest times the word was used (even if ambiguously), it established a critical reflection on the systems of production and distribution of art in Brazil and abroad.34

34 In regards to the increase in the number of invitations sent to Brazilians to participate in
In the Conclusion of this dissertation, one recent appropriation of Meireles’s *Insertions* series produced in the year 2002 is discussed. The appropriation made by Ricardo Basbaum and Eduardo Coimbra is described as a feedback of the series. The reason for Meireles softening his critique against capitalism is elaborated in the conclusion, as it reiterates the argument that the project is a conceptual artwork indefinitely open to feedback and recirculation in the systems of art.

This study concludes on the basis of this analysis that the *Insertions* series can be usefully understood through the theoretical framework of systems. It shows the limits of the dominant interpretations of the series, which neglect crucial characteristics of the series such as the feedback and the recirculation of the objects in the art world. This dissertation’s argument is that the *Insertions* series is an ongoing project using systems as mediums which are as well the targets of Meireles’s critique. Paradoxically, as art and capitalist systems grow and change, the *Insertions* series also thrives and transmutes. This study aims to add to the art scholarship on the Meireles’s series by acknowledging and analyzing the feedback and the recirculation of the *Insertions* series. Hopefully, this study will enrich the understanding of the *Insertions* series beyond the time frame of the year 1970 and will provide more understanding of the operations of the series which incite an always renewed interest in its several audiences.

CHAPTER 1—SYSTEMS

This first chapter presents the theoretical framework that supports this research. It starts by understanding what a system is, focusing on Francis Halsall’s definition of the concept of an open system. The definition of an open dynamic system serves as a tool throughout the dissertation to assess how the Insertions series interconnects with different systems of art and social systems. The chapter also introduces the debate and controversies about systems aesthetics and art systems in the United States and in Latin America.

Systems of Art

In his book, Systems of Art: Art, History and Systems Theory (2008), Francis Halsall describes a theoretical framework for applying systems theory to art history discourse. He proceeds to define the basic concept of a system, which is used in a myriad of ways across a variety of disciplines. Specifically, he describes a system as “a set of elements integrated with one another to such an extent that they form a recognizable coherent whole. In addition, this recognizable and coherent whole performs some type of recognizable function.”35 In a system, the function of the elements becomes meaningful due to the patterns of organization that govern it. In other words, in order for a system to operate, it needs some sort of order that can perform a legible function.

According to Halsall, systems theory can be applied to study the different groups of systems: natural, artificial, and epistemological. Natural refers to biological systems; artificial refers to human-manufactured systems (such as economic markets); and epistemological refers

35 Halsall, Systems of Art, 23.
to the many ways one can represent the world (that is, the study of knowledge and its limitations). These systems are considered “a separated order of systems because they are discursive systems of conceptual self-reflection.” Artificial and epistemological systems will inform the analyses conducted in this dissertation—after all, geopolitical and market forces are artificial systems, and art history is an epistemological system. The systems in question are dynamic, which means that they change over time and are constituted by complex patterns of unpredictable self-organization. These dynamic systems are characterized by their openness. A dynamic open system is influenced heavily by its environment, even within the abstract terrain of ideas. Conversely, a closed system is isolated from unexpected elements. Thus, because art history and the artistic propositions explored in this dissertation are open (or even circulate in a variety of systems), it is logical to evaluate their behavior through the framework of dynamic open systems.

Dynamic open systems tend toward a high level of complexity, within which they develop an autopoietic behavior that leads to the self-organization of their constituent elements. Open systems change via interactions with the environment—either through the information received from outside the system or through the transmission of information to the environment. In Systems of Art, Halsall describes a closed system using Clement Greenberg’s model of modern art. As it turns out, Francis Halsall and Luke Skrebowski agree that Greenberg treats the art object as a closed system in its formalist tenets; however, Halsall adds that Greenberg failed to recognize art criticism as part of a larger discursive system that influences art production. Indeed, Greenberg’s account does not consider the feedback that engages with the institutional and critical systems of art. Halsall proposed to overcome the limitations of Greenberg’s model

36 Ibid., 32.
by using systems theory to enlarge the discursive parameters within which one may consider the creation of an art object. Also, he seeks to understand the art object as a subsystem of the larger system of art that is interconnected with historical, socio-political, economic, and other (broader) artificial systems.

Halsall explains some of the attributes of a dynamic open system. One attribute of an open system is the ability to extrapolate the sum of its parts into a coherent whole. This means that the *entirety* of the system is the most important element for the purpose of analysis. By transferring this statement to an approach that one can use on a system of art, it is clear that an analysis of an artwork should go beyond the limits of the object and encompass its presentation, criticism, and circulation. In a complex system, every element is interconnected—what occurs to the system (or the elements inside it) affects the whole system. In applying this holistic critical approach to understand art, Halsall is following Niklas Luhmann’s sociology. For his part, Luhmann concentrates on the study of systemic structures of society, which diverts his attention away from the study of individual artworks. Instead, Luhmann focuses on the systems in which art occurs: “the art gallery; the art market, art discourse; and the artwork itself as a complex system.”

The consequence of this ideological shift, proposed by Halsall, takes us to another attribute of an open system: emergence. Emergence occurs when there is enough complexity in the system to elicit new patterns of behavior or new properties. Emergence occurs as part of the self-organizing principle of a complex system. According to Halsall, the concept of art itself could be understood as an emergent property of the broader systems with which art is associated.

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37 Ibid., 43.
Certainly, art’s complexity is due to the high number of distinguishable parts that are interconnected. In general, complex systems cannot be reduced to a simplified model because their parts cannot be extracted without jeopardizing the integrity of the whole system. Nevertheless, though complexity is always an attribute of open systems, complex system are not always complicated. Something complicated is by definition composed of multiple parts, but that does not mean that the multiple parts necessarily manifest complex behavior. In a complex system, the analysis of every single part of the system will not lead to the explanation of the whole. The complex functioning of the whole is more related to the dynamism of the system than to its size or multiple parts. A system’s complexity also stems from the intertwining of the elements, an intermingling that resists any disassociation.

The dynamism of the system—another attribute of open systems—depends upon the interaction of the elements in differing ways. “Each element is capable of behaving in different ways depending upon the other elements that it is interacting with and the mode of that interaction. In short, each part of a dynamic system must be flexible enough to work with other parts of the system in creating the dynamic whole that is a complex system.”38 This particular characteristic is important to my analysis in a later section, the INFORMATION Catalogue: Preparing the Terrain for Art in a Globalized Era. Dynamism also depends upon the organization of the system; interactions between elements of a system will only flow under certain circumstances. This idea—that the art world depends upon a kind of dynamic exchange between its parts—is shared and reinforced by Halsall when he states: “in order to be complex a system must actualize its potential for dynamic interaction.”39 Thus, the organization of the

38 Ibid., 47.
39 Ibid.
system of art (as a complex system) should allow self-organization that does not compromise its complex dynamism.

Another reason dynamism and complexity exist within the system of art is due to the nonlinear interconnection of its parts. The fact that certain, nonlinear elements of the system interact in many different ways leads to its complexity. As Halsall writes, “non-linearity is a defining feature of complex systems and also allows for another key characteristic of complex systems namely positive feedback within complex systems where small causes can have large effects.” The non-linearity in a dynamic system is due to the system’s ability to “remember” its operations. The operations in a system are constituted by the possibility of connecting and differentiating in a balanced manner. If a system contains connections between all its elements, but there is no differentiation in the system, it becomes a closed and static system. The balance between order and disorder depends upon the fact that the dynamic system has a self-recognition capability.

Isomorphism is the final, key concept mentioned by Halsall. In fact, the concept forms the methodology employed to write his book. He explains that isomorphism is the principle that permeates the whole general systems theory. He states that Ludwig von Bertalanffy used the method to overcome the isolation of different disciplines by adopting a universal approach of knowledge that analyzes structural similarities inside the disciplines. By identifying what the disciplines had in common, it was possible to create general principles connecting them. “Thus

40 Ibid., 49.
41 Ibid., 52. See also a compelling analyzes of contemporary artistic proposition using Luhmann’s idea that form is prior to the medium as offered by Irene Small in her article “Medium Aspecificity/Autopoietic Form.” In Contemporary Art: 1989 to the Present, edited by Suzanne Perling Hudson and Alexander Blair Dumbadze (Chichester, West Sussex: Wiley-Blackwell, 2013).
the universal concept of the ‘system’ serves as the overarching conceptual framework by which a multitude of phenomena from diverse fields of study can be explained. In the spirit of such an interdisciplinary method further general and ‘isomorphic’ systems principles can be observed in the systems of art.”

Halsall mentions the sociologist Niklas Luhmann as a contributor to the study of art as a subsystem of society, which consists of micro-relations between agents who organize themselves from the bottom up in the hierarchy of given structures—social, economic, and political. Halsall states that the most important contribution of Luhmann was the idea that form and medium come first (in that order). People first identify the emergence of the shape of an object, piece of music, or environment. After, they determine the medium of that form. Luhmann defends the idea that there is no media specificity within the arts; different art forms are capable of communicating something within the system of art. With Luhmann, “the traditional notion that ‘medium constitutes form’ is replaced by the notion that ‘form constitutes medium.’” The artwork is only understood as such if the objects or sounds around it corroborate the space of perception. In this sense, the space around the manifestation of the artwork is crucial to its understanding. Museums, galleries—and in the case of Meireles’s *Insertions* series, the references to the distribution of goods, services, and capital—are crucial to the emergence of the forms as media.

Having introduced the guiding principles of open and complex systems, this dissertation asserts that, though such principles could be used to describe numerous contemporary artistic

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42 Ibid., 53.
43 Ibid., 57.
proposals, the *Insertions* series is different. Not only was Meireles one of the first\(^{44}\) (and thus, historically important) artists to employ a systems-based practice, but he also crafted an ongoing proposal. This continuation amid occasional change helps maintain public attention on the whole *Insertions* series.

Another important concept within systems theory, which will assist in my analysis of the *Insertions* series, is the feedback produced via instruction. If many readings of the series are associated with the idea of reproducibility—which I contend in a later section, *Coca-Cola as a Readymade: Meireles’s Appropriation of Duchamp’s Strategy*—how do multiples of an original work differ from the feedback principle? This study posits that though multiplicity depends upon the artist’s intervention, feedback can be triggered by a variety of agents within or outside of the system of art. Indeed, the range and number of coauthors involved in such systems challenges the possibility of fully historicizing the work. One must consider the fact that differing members of the audience will never encounter certain parts of the feedback—a notion that I investigate elsewhere in the dissertation. Further, the openness of the system changes the context and the meaning attributed to the artist’s first action, which complicates the historicization of his work and makes the task compelling and fragile at once. This openness can be found in many contemporary practices that follows the same system principles.

\(^{44}\) Another important contribution to system thinking in art is the works of Hans Haacke as discussed by Luke Skrebowski. According to Skrebowski, the framework in which Haacke chose to work testifies in favor of another genealogy of conceptual art, this time connected to a critical practice in which systems are considered in all of their ambiguity. Systems art becomes, then, involved in the problems of “the residually aesthetic presentation of the artwork; the ontologically constitutive role of the situation for the artwork; the relation of artistic and social technique; the relationship of art to the art system; the relationship of the art system to other social systems.” (Haacke quoted in Skrebowski, *Systems, Context, Relations*, 129). These problems are recurrent in contemporary art practices being theorized under the terms of a contextual, situational or relational art. Those problems were unfolded from the systems art of the 1970s and address better the multi layered apprehensions of the systems notion as well a political and conceptual engagement in which artists were operating.
Systems Aesthetics and System as Medium

Several exhibitions addressing the questions of technology, information systems, and cybernetics were organized in the late 1960s and early 1970s in the United States, the United Kingdom, Argentina, and Brazil. In the United States, the most controversial exhibition was *Software, Information Technology: Its New Meaning for Art* at the Jewish Museum in New York in 1970, organized by Jack Burnham (Figure 2). The invitation to organize this exhibition came after the museum director, Karl Katz, saw Burnham’s lecture at the Guggenheim Museum in 1969.\(^{45}\) In the lecture, Burnham presented part of his theory, “Systems Esthetics,” a term he coined and used in a series of articles he wrote during the same period. He was one of the first artists and art historians to theorize about a post-formalist artistic practice and to point to a confluence among cybernetics, information theory, and art. For Burnham, culture was changing from a society focused mainly on the patterns that resulted from technologically conceived artifacts (which he called an “object-oriented culture”) to a society more interested in “the way things are done than in things.”\(^{46}\)

Though the idea of a system included the idea of a medium, it must also be seen as more broadly encompassing art agents, institutional activities, and discourse (criticism, theorization, and historicism). In his book, *Beyond Modern Sculpture: the Effects of Science and Technology on Sculpture of Our Time* (1968), Burnham claimed that in the twentieth century, the transformations taking place in sculpture were logical consequences of technological and

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scientific advances in modern society. At that time, the book was heavily criticized for the close connection he drew between art and technology, which was seen with suspicion—in part because of its almost celebratory association with military power and capitalist ideology.47 Readers questioned the libertarian paradigm shift in the art that he envisioned, fearing the dystopian consequences of such technological determinism. In another article published at Artforum in 1968, Burnham formulated the idea of a “Systems Esthetics,” or a new artistic paradigm able to address an industrial society whose products, once designed to improve life, and had become ecologically problematic. By the 1960s, Burnham argued, the needs of society had changed and society now had to embrace newly modeled relationships between humans and machines; improved use of natural resources; production of more accurate models of social interaction; and alternative patterns of education, productivity, and leisure.48

Organizational skills became a main concern of the new postindustrial society, in which all relations between organic and nonorganic systems could be traceable and improved. Art, understood as a system, should reflect the same tendencies in the conceptualization and execution of its practices. It should not be limited to material or medium specificity. What

47 Jack Burnham, “The Future of Responsive Systems in Art,” in Beyond Modern Sculpture: the Effects of Science and Technology on Sculpture of Our Time (New York: G. Brazille, 1968). In this chapter of his book, Burnham describes the polemic around the first festival of art and technology in New York in 1966. According to Burnham, this “9 evenings: theater and engineering” event was considered by critics “as either poorly contrived happenings or dull theatre, even by avant-garde standards. Few if any had the prescience to appreciate the events for what they were: man-machine systems with a completely different set of values from those found in structured dramatics or the one-night kinetic spectacular.” Burnham also describes in this same chapter the functions of the Experiments in the Art and Technology Inc., which was the official patron of the event. “In its role as a clearing house for ideas, E.A.T. with its technical staff hopes to establish new connections between the art world and industry, facilitate dialogue between the artist and engineer leading to new aesthetic insights, and give out information as needed by both groups concerning recent innovations in both fields.” Burnham acknowledges the controversy in the association between engineers and artists at the E.A.T, although asserts that technology inevitably affects the future of sculpture making.

48 Ibid., 165
constituted a system was the interaction of its elements, which usually combined people, energy, material, messages, and ideas. Burnham claimed that, “in evaluating systems the artist is a perspectivist considering goals, boundaries, structure, input, output, and related activity inside and outside the system.”

System-oriented art connects environment to institutional systems. The ways things are done are as relevant as what is done. He criticized Michael Fried’s depreciation of minimalist sculptures that labeled them literalist or theatrical art, explaining how the multimedia and temporal dimension of art had always been central to the artistic and technological process. He also noted that the perpetuation of the object was not now—nor had it ever been—the main concern of art.

Among the artworks Burnham selected for Software were Douglas Huebler’s Variable Piece # 4: New York City (Figure 6), Hans Haacke’s Visitor’s Profile (Figure 4), Sonia Sheridan’s Interactive Paper Systems (Figure 5), and Joseph Kosuth’s The Seventh Investigation (Art as Idea as Idea) (Figure 3). Haacke and Sheridan engaged the public in participatory propositions, the former in a demographic survey of the museum-goers, and the latter in a do-it-yourself photocopy experiment. Kosuth presented a multimedia proposition that expanded the means of art circulation, and Huebler invited the audience to anonymously write secrets in exchange for another person’s photocopied confession.

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49 Ibid., 166.
50 Ibid.
51 Liz Kotz, Words to be Looked At: Language in 1960s Art (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2010), 245.
53 Ibid.
Burnham curated his exhibition and proposed that art was a complex system in which software was the set of ideas and concepts and hardware was the material embodiment of those ideas. Some of the devices in the exhibition did not work properly, strengthening the opposition of conservatives against system aesthetics. But despite the exhibition’s failures, Burnham’s model explored a structuralist notion of art mingled with the conceptual and informational tendencies developing in the art of the late 1960s. At that time, Burnham’s theory was not welcomed in academic circles. In addition, the October group, of which he was initially a member, discredited his work. Only during the last few decades has his theory been reassessed by art historians.

My aim in looking back at Burnham’s arguments is to show how his theory dealt with systems of information and new technology, specifically that the (de)materialization of the artwork addressed the structure of the institutional systems (museums and galleries). His theory did not exclude—nor was it limited to—the debates surrounding minimalist sculptures. Rather,

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his ideas engaged contemporary conceptual and art-and-technology practices. Moreover, it is important to return to that moment because of the antagonism levied against Burnham’s thinking.

By returning to these texts, we can better understand the tension between technology and conceptual art—and between Anglo-American conceptual art and Latin American ideological conceptualism. Furthermore, though the historiography situates art history’s reintroduction of systems theory and critical theory in the 1980s and 1990s, Burnham as well as the Latin American critics, were all informed by the social and philosophical approach of the Frankfurt School as an alternative to the powerful and pervasive ideology of capitalism. All in turn were deeply engaged with artists asking questions such as, how could ideological apparatuses work in favor of a cultural revolution and escape the fetishization of art and its circulation as a product?; What kinds of artworks or art projects could interrupt this process?; Which formal solutions would they offer?

To answer many of those questions, systems aesthetics should be thought about in conjunction with other theoretical approaches that try to understand the status of the artistic practice after the demise of the imperatives of medium specificity so diffused in the 1950s. As Halsall affirms, the post-medium condition theorized by Rosalind Krauss in the 1980s and the dematerialization of the art object conceived by Lucy Lippard in the late 1960s could be linked to Burnham’s theory. With the emergence of conceptualism, the dematerialization of the art object should be understood not as a denial of the materiality of art, but as an expansion of the notion of medium. Medium should be viewed as moving from a traditional, stratified, self-

56 Skrebowski, Systems, Context, Relations.
referential set of conventions and techniques to a multimedia, experimental artistic practice (or to the notion of medium as a system).

Building on Krauss’s work, Pamela M. Lee, in her 2004 book, *Chronophobia: On Time in the Art of the 1960s*, investigates the idea of art as a system in regards to the temporal aspect of the artistic practices of the 1960s. In her text, she revisits the controversial article by Michael Fried, “Art and Objecthood” (1967) and finds that the theoretical approach Fried employed to criticize the theatricality of minimalist sculpture was used by Burnham as a defense of the same feature he was trying to reject. Fried resented the path that sculpture was taking, and the way it had incorporated time into its production. Time existed via the repetition of structures, via everyday life objects, and via the sharing of the object’s space with the spectator. Lee explains that later generations of systems theorists made the role of the observer central to the observation of any system—whether closed or open. Later theorists maintained that both were strictly defined by how they were observed and who was doing the observing. In cybernetics, the focus is on the variables or messages inserted into the systems because every new message alters and constitutes the system. This is called the feedback element in system behavior. This disruptive element that emerged in art was strongly opposed by modernist critics.

System discourse coincided with what Fried feared most and with what Burnham was defending in art at the time: art proposed as a system would include environmental, structural, communicational, and organizational elements to engage the spectator in the same system. The idea of medium-specificity and expressionist criteria of art envisioned by Clement Greenberg, Michael Fried, and Harold Rosenberg had reached its peak and was on the decline. With the

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58 Ibid., 61.
59 Ibid., 74.
emergence of minimalist sculpture (often regarded as the first post-modern, post-medium, artistic practice in America), there was a marked shift in focus from object to system.

The notion of systems not only pervaded the art discourse of the 1960s, but also the social and political spheres that were at the root of student riots in Europe, campaigns for civil rights in America, and anti-dictatorship movements in Latin America.\(^{60}\) In systems art, there is an anti-aesthetic tendency that stems from its search for a critical appropriation of the vocabulary and the mechanisms of the system in its theoretical and scientific manifestations. Artists mimic the technological rationality described in systems theory, information theory and cybernetics as a means of establishing a rational aesthetics.\(^{61}\) Likewise these artists used such methods to overcome formalistic modernism and modernization, which was perceived as wholly positive and progressive. This stylistic adoption occurred when there was a shift in capitalist production driven by the implementation (headed by Robert McNamara) of systems theory to develop a post assembly-line production system within the American military industrial complex.\(^{62}\) Despite the proliferation of systems theory within different academic disciplines, governmental development

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\(^{61}\) Skrebowski, “Systems, Contexts and Relations.” In his dissertation, Skrebowski seeks to prove that, despite the fact that Jack Burnham had become known for his uncritical associations with technology, he had written critical material while referencing Herbert Marcuse’s political philosophy. In addition, Burnham had championed artists and artworks that sought to problematize the uses of technology in art. See also: Jack Burnham, *Art in the Marcusean Analysis* (Pennsylvania: The University of Pennsylvania State Press, 1969).

strategies pigeonholed the notion as aggressive and expansionistic. This change in connotation provoked intellectuals and artists in the 1960s and 1970s to oppose systems theory.

The artistic opposition that derives from systems theory is inherently ambivalent. It uses and exposes the system of production and distribution, and it legitimizes the bourgeoisie by employing the most up-to-date instruments of social control. This ambivalence can be understood as an artistic impulse that scrutinizes the ideological aspects of society and its aesthetic systems. This means that the subsequent practices—those formerly embroiled in philosophical debate regarding the formal aspects of the art object—instilled concern about the ideological aspects of aesthetic investigation.63

Building on art historian Luke Skrebowski’s thesis—that the Frankfurt School presents a parallel modernism that informs the works of conceptual artists not linked to Greenbergian modernism—this dissertation intends to revisit Meireles’s Insertions series within a systems framework in order to open up the debate around conceptual art and conceptualism and discuss the degrees of correspondence in seemingly divergent modes of artistic practice. Through this discourse, this research seeks to unveil the tension between Northern and Southern versions of conceptualism.

In the Brazilian context, systems theory and cybernetics had different implications in artistic discourse because they had been connected to the concrete movement of the 1950s. Concrete art in Brazil deployed the idea of a system in a reductive approach to information theory, cybernetics, and gestalt theory. The artists in the movement used such theories as a

methodology to industrialize art production. Differently, in the United States, one of the results of the introduction of system discourse in the artistic sphere was that art-and-technology tendencies initiated new debates surrounding art and new media. As Caroline A. Jones has explained, American artists initiated a de-sublimation of the technology typical of a fully

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64 Brito, Neoconcretism, 101. The concrete movement emerged in Brazil around 1950 to counter the populist figurative and paintings of modernism, which had spread in local art through the influence of Mexican muralism. A group of artist was formed in São Paulo, Ruptura, and another one in Rio de Janeiro, Frente. The Ruptura group was radical in its systematization of rules and procedures of what constituted the concrete project. Figuration, naturalism, and all conventions related to traditional perspectival painting were abolished and replaced by gestalt theory and its laws of perception. Formal exercises in language and pure form enabled a set of procedures in which visual information was manipulated and invented. These semiotic processes were meant to introduce a new visual order to the spectator. In this new visual syntax, a method of production consistent with the rigor of science and its data operational systems was necessary. Their methodology was compatible with organizational skills present in cybernetic theory. According to Brito, for concrete artists in São Paulo: “Art would be a type of engineering of the visual communication process. […] This production characterized itself by the systematic exploration of serial form, of time and mechanical movement and it defines itself by its strictly optical-sensorial intentions. That is, it proposed a perception game against representational content—a program of optical exercises that were in themselves “beautiful” and significant, that meant the exploitation and invention of new visual sintags whose interest was their capacity to renew the possibility of communication and their capacity to act as feedbacks, factors of the fight against entropy, to use the terminology of the theory of information. Concrete art is an aesthetics repertory of the optical and sensorial possibilities prescribed by the gestalt theory.” As elaborated here, against the entropy present of social systems, concrete artists envisioned art as messages and informational processes and focused on their organization as messages. The elements in these messages—color, serial repetition, and the dynamic of figure background—followed compositional rules with technical formalization similar to industrialized models. The objective of compositional research was the automation of production processes. Concrete artists from São Paulo believed in informatization and mass production of artistic practices as part of the country’s cultural modernization. In their obsessive pursuit of schematization through the application of the laws of perception, they became illustrators of the gestalt theory. Concrete artists reduced their contribution to society to a program inside the domain of language, seeing their role as conformist and a servant to State and private powers which centralized and controlled social practices. Their operations idealized collectivity as being detached from the class struggles that were produced by the system they supported, thinking about society as a pure informational flow that spreads homogeneously and evenly throughout the collective. Repressing class conflict and the ideological bases of society, the role of the artist was no different than that of the industrial designer. Even when they included participatory elements in the work, they leaned towards informational engagement of the spectator in the production of art. They did not consider the phenomenological and existential implications of participation or how art might be employed to confront the instrumentalization of aesthetics. In fact, they asserted that instrumentality should be applied to expand artistic practices in all sectors of the industrial complex.

industrialized and modern society. In the Brazilian context of the late 1960s, the notion of systems became more closely connected to its ideological and political readings.

Meanwhile, neoconcretism’s acceptance of the social function of art emerged as its refusal to accept the notion of abstract geometry that was reduced to the confines of a traditional medium (and to applications of gestalt theory as a means of objectifying art and artistic practices). As the art historian Ronaldo Brito asserted in 1976, concrete artists attempted to plan the development of a society without understanding the limits and conflicts involved in implementing their program. In particular, they neglected the exploitative conditions implicit in the capitalist system. Recognizing their denial of capitalistic logic, neoconcrete artists adopted a position of skepticism toward their social role and its connection to industrialization, technology, and mass media. Building on this foundation, the next generation of artists (after neoconcretism) produced the first critique of mass media and capitalist development in Brazil in the late 1960s. Thus, artists in the early 1970s—more precisely, Cildo Meireles, Artur Barrio, and Antonio Manuel—were skeptical of the scientific parameters of art production.

While artists in Brazil often engaged in systems theory through mass media and extra-artistic circuits and systems of exchange, it is crucial to understand why the word system was not prominent in the Brazilian vocabulary in the 1970s. For one, the concrete artists’ dogmatic approach to cybernetic, system, and information theories rendered those terms uninteresting to a new generation of artists. As earlier mentioned, Meireles rarely uses the word system in his writings. He preferred to use the word circuit to describe his engagement with art as a system.

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Additionally, this rejection of the word system is related to the worldwide artists’ boycott of the section of the 1971 São Paulo Biennial that would have been organized by the Argentine art critic Jorge Glusberg around the art systems theme.

This event is very relevant to understand the use of art systems in Latin America. The proposed theme of the exhibition (art systems) was not accepted by Latin American artists. They perceived such a theme as dangerously connected to the real systems of domination in Brazil which, at that time, were represented by the military dictatorship. As this watershed event provides the broader context of art systems in Latin America, I will address it before discussing the particular events involving Meireles’s works.

**Systems in Latin America under Dictatorship**

By 1971, while Meireles lived in New York68, a major event shaped the perception of systems in Latin American countries. The XI São Paulo Biennial was the catalyst event: artists, critics, curators, and art historians began to identify the dominant art system as the primary target for critique. Before analyzing this event in Brazil, however, it is important to investigate the appearance of systems exhibitions in Argentina.

Despite prior interventions by Argentine artists in the realm of mass communication, it was the art critic Jorge Glusberg, who was especially influential in introduction and resignification of the notion of art systems in Argentina. Glusberg organized the first exhibition of the Centro de Estudios de Arte y Comunicación [Center of Art and Communication Studies]. For this important event, Glusberg wrote a text concerned with an interdisciplinary approach to

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68 The fifth chapter of this dissertation describes Meireles’s *Insertions* produced while he lived in the United States.
artistic practice. The text, entitled “Art and Cybernetics” (1969), was intended to introduce the Argentine public to new functions of computation and the emergent field of cybernetics.

Drawing from Marshall McLuhan’s writings, Glusberg described how art of the future would constitute a continuous creative act. The exhibition brought different systems projects by artists like Luis Benedit, Ernesto Deira, Antonio Berni, Eduardo Mac Entyre, Oswaldo Romberg and Miguel Angel Vidal. For Glusberg, cybernetics was understood as a universal discipline, and was interpreted as a revolutionary step in the production of knowledge in which models of artificial systems would optimize human activities. In Glusberg’s views, systems art would facilitate interaction between the artist and the spectator and this exchange would increase in parallel with the growth of social and geographical interchange. Artists should be envisioning this future of intense interchange, without fixed goals for their artwork. In his words: “Their aim is not a fixed attitude, nor a definitive connection, but a net of uncertainties, ambiguities, and a field where nothing is established. The artist of this time is more interested in behavior than in the essence of things; this tendency can be clearly identified with cybernetic vision.” In his first text, Glusberg was clearly concerned with the connections between art and technology without neglecting (or entirely focusing) on the social components of this new artistic practice. The conceptual approach to systems in Glusberg’s writing appears after his collaboration with the artist and critic Lucy Lippard, who was engaged with post-minimalist and conceptual practices in the United States.

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69 A picture of Luis Benedit’s art proposal influenced by system is in the appendix. The mentioned proposal was exhibited at the Art Systems in Latin America show in 1974.

In December of 1970, Glusberg collaborated with Lippard to curate a show of conceptual art with artists from Europe, Canada, and United States. The exhibition was the first in a series held at the Centro de Arte y Comunicación (CAYC) in Buenos Aires, in which conceptual art and systems art were presented as synonymous. In his announcement of the exhibition, Glusberg wrote that conceptualism aimed at interrupting the circuit of distribution of art and its various agents (art dealer, audience, collector, critic and the artist) by using the systems of industrial and mass production. Press media and cinema were taken by the artists in their investigations of communication processes with the “spectator-reader.” Their practices were no longer concerned with the creation of objects, but rather the manipulation of information. Glusberg affirmed that these emerging conceptual tendencies contrasted with the existing art forms of minimalism and pop art. In this text, he begins to address issues that he would further elaborate as an “art system” in later exhibitions. It is worth noting that in this exhibition, Glusberg’s description of conceptual art drew associations between what he understood to be conceptual art and art systems, but as I will explore later, the terms collapsed here, and in subsequent exhibitions, were contentious.

In this preliminary text, Glusberg affirmed that conceptual art forged a new sociological function for the artist, in that he or she was concerned with the viewer’s participation. As the art object ceased to be central to the productive aspects of the art world, art became more accessible as a process of communication, thus driving conceptual artists to investigate the systems of production and the collectivization of their practices. In his words, “conceptual art is interested in the environment around us, in time, in processes, and in systems interrelated with daily life experiences.”

71 Jorge Glusberg, “CAyC: Arte Conceptual; Una exhibición organizada por Lucy Lippard (EE.UU) y Jorge Glusberg, November 28, 1970”. Typed announcement of exhibition. Biblioteca del
The ways in which Glusberg was framing the term system, however, came under attack with his organization of two showrooms for the XI São Paulo Biennial in 1971. Glusberg had been invited by founder of the Biennial, Francisco Matarazzo Sobrinho, to curate two exhibitions at the biennial and introduce the discussions about *Art as Idea* and *Art and Cybernetics* to the Brazilian public. He only accepted the invitation after securing the participation of a number of artists through a special trip to the United States. Among the artists were Vito Acconci, Walter de Maria, Robert Smithson, Gordon Matta-Clark, Lawrence Weiner, Richard Serra, Les Levine, Christo, Dan Graham, On Kawara, Joseph Kosuth, Douglas Huebler, Robert Barry, Michael Heizer, Christine Koslov, and John Baldessari. In organizing the *Art Systems* exhibition, Glusberg sent official invitations to these artists explaining that the show would not be organized according to nationality and that there would be no competition for prizes, as it was meant to be an independent presentation within the biennial. Despite the special conditions through which Glusberg sought to guarantee a political immunity for the exhibition, artists in the United States started to reconsider their decision and withdraw their participation from the event as they did not want to align their work with the repressive practices of the Brazilian government.

Two group letters were sent to Glusberg, one headed by Gordon Matta-Clark and the other by the Latin American Cultural Independence Movement (MICLA). In Matta-Clark’s letter, he claimed that the purpose with which the biennial was founded in the 1950s had been distorted, and that the free intellectual atmosphere that it inspired the first decade of the biennial had been replaced by unacceptable censorship and persecution. He stated that Glusberg was mistaken in thinking that the show could inform Brazilian artists of the outside events and

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contribute to the free communication between South America and other countries in the world. As Matta-Clark stated: “Given that all institutions and all individuals are under dictatorship, it would be completely nonsense to think that one could organize an ‘independent’ exhibition there, in September.” He said that if artists sent their artworks to the exhibition, the artworks would contribute to the prestige and credibility to the military regime; he had changed his initial opinion of the exhibit after talking to Brazilian artists in exile in the United States. Matta-Clark rallied artists to boycott the biennial in São Paulo and any event that Glusberg was trying to create in Argentina as an extension of the biennial, seeing the curator’s efforts as suspicious and opportunistic in face of such a grave political situation. Matta-Clark encouraged artists to send letters to Glusberg or to any magazine that would publicize the artists’ protest against the situation in Brazil. His letter was ultimately signed by fourteen artists—Hans Haacke, Dan Graham, Vito Acconci, Carl Andre, Robert Morris, Walter De Maria, Michael Heizer, Lee Jaffe, Christo, Richard Serra, Mel Bochner, Terry Fox, Les Levine, and Keith Sonnier—and sent to Artforum.

As a response to Matta-Clark, the artists affiliated with MICLA—Luis Wells, Luis Camnitzer, Carla Stellweg, Liliana Porter and Teodoro Maus—organized a book, Contrabienal [Counter Biennial], with texts by Latin American critics and artists, mostly Argentines, on the biennial polemic (Figure 7 and Figure 8). The intention of this book was not to replace the lack of representation in the São Paulo Biennial with another exhibition or catalogue, but rather to oppose the current cultural imperialism through a collection of texts. In the letters drafted by the

members of MICLA, it is clear that they understood the Brazilian biennial as a product of a capitalist system and cultural dominance. As the critic Horacio Safons stated in his contribution to *Contrabienal*:

Biennials are one of the most exquisite products of the system. But they are not the system. Every action must have this in mind, in its entirety. And not their manifestations isolated. To do this, Latin American artists must have their operating agencies, which plan and structure short and long term strategies. Latin American artists must be prepared to surround the cultural manifestations of the system and destroy them. They call biennial conferences, seminars or symposia. [...] The São Paulo Biennial should be surrounded to be destroyed. To address the problem that would suffice the criterion of guerrilla, not intellectual slumber.  

According to Safons, Latin American artists must oppose the instrumentalization of the concept of systems through the infiltration of actual systems of domination. In other words, they should resist the aestheticization of systems through “art systems.” Safons and Julio Le Parc’s contribution to the book pointed to a need for demythologizing mainstream art and a desire for a cultural revolution in which the function of the artist and the art would set aside the intervention of state of affairs in the art world. With overtones of Marcusean social philosophy (which ironically Glusberg himself employed in earlier texts), *Contrabienal* triggered Glusberg’s resignation from the São Paulo Biennial and, moreover, produced a debate about internationalism and provincialism at the core of the notion of system. After the refusal of all Argentine artists to participate in what they called *The Dictatorial Biennial*, Glusberg sought to reshape his concept of art systems from a universal phenomenon—in which all conceptual systems related and technological practices across the globe are seamlessly integrated—to one that accounted for regional disparities within the international events of the art world.

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In his 1972 text for the exhibition Hacia un Perfil del Arte Latinoamericano [Towards a Profile of Latin American Art], Glusberg returned to the exhibition at CAYC [Center for Art and Communication], focusing specifically on activities of the members of the Grupo de Los Trece [Group of Thirteen], which was formed by experimental Argentine artists working with different media. Borrowing Louis Althusser’s definition of ideology as a system of collective representation (along with the ideas of Nikos Poulantzas and Antonio Gramsci), Glusberg stated that ideology developed false structural conditions of reality in the social imagination and operated in order to maintain veiled the relations of exploitation in the capitalist system. In his words: “The ideological is opposed to the scientific, because it does not propose knowledge of the objective reality, but rather an adaptation to the system’s practices.”74 Social formation, therefore, is organized by the principles of the dominant culture and the economic power of the bourgeoisie. And individuals primarily comprehend their social reality through ideology and its expression in art. Glusberg suggested that “from the standpoint of semiology, art is an ideological discourse, i.e., a semiological system, because discourse is any system of signs. Through the artistic fact, one can, by following the above definitions, become aware of one’s social reality. An ideology, as a system of collective representations, is nothing more than a system of meanings.”75 In this light, Glusberg affirmed that art constituted as a system of signification of the real had been ideologically manipulated in such a way that it became impossible for economically enslaved countries (like those of Latin America) not to address the dependency and tributary situation of the art world. And for this reason, the Grupo de Los Trece...


75 Ibid.
aimed to make apparent the aspects of ideology that circumscribed all art production in Latin America. Whether an artist was aware of it or not, the ideological aspect of the system of art pervades all artistic production. *Grupo de Los Trece* was therefore rationally and systematically engaged in the creation of a program that made tangible the ideological aspects of their production through the precise demonstration of its political condition. The products displayed in the exhibition were described by Glusberg as having revealed the conditions of their production through the “1) opacity of significant substance (blueprint role); 2) opacity of each work content (monument to the unknown political prisoner for example, evidences its Latin American provenance); 3) opacity that manifests standardization and easy reproduction in technique (opacity as a manifestation of the conditions of production) come together to produce the problematic of the exhibition.”

In addition to elaborating the relationship between art and ideology in Latin America, Glusberg’s text also addressed a key problem of the criticism and historiography in Latin American art that he would reiterate in a report about Documenta 5 a few days after the exhibition at CAYC. For Glusberg, the inequalities of the global art market were apparent in the omission of Argentine or Latin American artists in important exhibitions like Documenta. He argued that their exclusion might be blamed on retrograde critical and artistic production of Argentine artists, but that in fact the situation was far more complex. For one, the inequalities produced through the ‘*colonial*’ period had not been overcome, but rather reproduced by ‘*cosmopolitan*’ period initiated by the concrete movement in the 1950s. Additionally, the subsequent artistic movements of the late 1960s, such as those in Rosario, were often concerned with urgent matters within their own *national* context and repressive cultural contexts. This

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76 Ibid.
concern however was not motivated by the interest in native or ethnical aspects; it was a reaction to the ideological domination that existed inside the global system of art itself and its multilayered financial, aesthetical, political, and historical aspect. The new generation of artists pressed critics, like Glusberg, to review the political and economic regimes behind the artistic production and how they were articulated in the network of predetermined ideological systems that obscures its own modus operandi. Moreover, the critics were called to support artists who understood popular culture not as dissemination of the dominant culture within the ruling classes, but as the fight for cultural change in all spheres of social life. The exhibition *Hacia un Perfil Latinoamericano del Arte* exemplified for Glusberg the possibility for the popularization Argentine art through exhibitions that could easily travel around the country because of the reproducible format of the work. Furthermore, the critic saw this nationally oriented art as the only means for Argentine artists to be considered in the international circuit of art and to be eligible for display their artworks in an exhibition like Documenta. Through engagement with the specificities of their own cultural and political contexts, Glusberg imagined that Latin American artists paradoxically could break into the mainstream artistic circuits.

Although Glusberg’s statement was seen as controversial, this concept laid the foundation for the first essays by the art historian, critic, and curator, Marta Traba. The art in Latin America that Traba championed was nationalistic or regionalist, and detached from the North American and European tradition of art. She saw it as the only way peripheral countries could reach a

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77 See Frederico Morais, *Artes Plásticas na América Latina: do Transe ao Transitório* (Rio de Janeiro: Civilização Brasileira, 1979), 181. Anticipating the ideological conceptualism championed by Fiz, Ramírez and Camnitzer, Glusberg’s initiative led him to concentrate his efforts in promoting Argentine artists associated to the Center of Art and Communication (CAYC). *Grupo de Los Trece* was made up of Jacques Bedel, Luis Benedit, Gregorio Dujovny, Carlos Gizburg, Víctor Grippo, Jorge González Mir, Vicente Marotta, Luis Pazos, Alfredo Portillos, Juan Carlos Romero, Julio Teich, Horacio
cultural autonomy. That position, however, is insufficient for gaining an understanding of the recurrence of the *Insertions* series—beyond its initial appearance in 1970s. After all, the series receives constant feedback beyond the scope of one particular period.

**The First Insertion: Changing Systems through the Use of Circuits**

In the early 1970s, a decade after the neoconcrete movement was over, artists such as Meireles were struggling to find a way to politicize their practices by reassessing the failures of the constructivist project in Brazil. These failures included the apolitical and subjectivist phenomenological approach of neoconcrete’s dissidents in Rio de Janeiro. This urge for a political dimension was both the result of the military coup in Brazil and the motivation for artists frustrated with the current state of contemporary art. In the 1970s artists’ generation, Meireles did not participate in this show.

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Zabala, Alberto Pellegrino, and Jorge Glusberg himself. Among the many publications and events successfully promoted by Glusberg, in 1974 he curated the show *Art Systems in Latin America* at Institute of Contemporary Arts in London. In the introductory announcement he stated that Latin American artists conscious of their underdeveloped economical and cultural situation should create an art of liberation; “This new art attempts to break away with the ideological domination of countries that have the power and the wealth. Sometimes it uses the same methodology and language, other times, the characteristics are different and unique. But we cannot deny that there is a common attitude, a common strategy for liberation, extracted from the political and social spheres and applied to art,” in Jorge Glusberg, *Art Systems in Latin America* / Institute of Contemporary Arts (London: Nash House, 1974). According to Frederico Morais, despite Glusberg’s effort to promote Latin American art, along the way his curatorial decisions and the art systems championed by the group became more and more similar to an Argentine tradition of technically well developed painting, excluding the experimental and destructive forces at play in the 1960s and even 1950s generation of Argentine artists. This conservative tendency was pointed out at the end of the decade by Frederico Morais in his article, “Argentina: Los Trece de la Fama ou o Campo de Batalha das Influências Internacionais” [Argentina: The Thirteen’s Fame or the Battle Field of International Influences]. In this article Morais compare two 1978 exhibitions in Buenos Aires, one with older generation of Argentine artist and the other with participants of the Grupo de Los Trece. The former, according to Morais, displayed more compelling works than the later. In the appendix is the catalogue cover of the *Art Systems in Latin America* show. Meireles did not participate in this show.

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78 Brito, *Neoconcretismo*, 106. According to Brito, the neoconcrete group little considered its own social participation and remained aligned with the constructivist project’s use of geometry—albeit emphasizing experimentation. And yet it was their very apolitical position that, however ironically, facilitated their break with the postulates of the constructivist project as such. In their experiments, they primarily considered the artistic, philosophical, and scientific parameters of their investigations. They had
revisions of the concrete paradigm made the word system synonymous with the powerful structure of domination manipulated by State and private forces. The system symbolized immeasurable power relations in which individual rights were subsumed by bureaucratic, corporate, and police organizations. If the means of mass production and mass communication were envisioned before as allies in the developmentist project of concretism, those same apparatuses were seen as tools of mass manipulation by a new generation of artists in the late 1960s. Indeed, mass production and mass communication hid the atrocities of abusive military regimes and served the economical and political interests of the owners and accomplices of the regime.

no investment in the social order, nor did they feel pressured by market demands. Neoconcrete artists organized themselves as a small elite, freed from the conflicts of artists who adapted their production to the urgency of the market. Their approach to the debates around the art occurred in a friendly atmosphere in which historical currents in the arts like romanticism and dadaism were revisited. For the most part, the conceptualization of art-making was more relevant than the insertion of their production into the social sphere. However this apolitical aspect of the neoconcrete movement in Brazil was responsible for advancing the constructivist project to the point that it actually ruptured with its own postulates. By its rejection of the constructivist’s social program, they intended to produce art in the sphere of an increasingly globalized culture in which their art would not be instrumentalized by national modernization. Art, they believed, should preserve its independence as a field of knowledge not to be used for industrial and marketing purposes or a specific political agenda. Their views of production, time, and space therefore greatly differed from concretism. In the neoconcrete perspective, artists sought expression as a means to avoid the rigid mechanization of the art, and yet did not aim a return to the genius figure of the traditional art. They saw expression connected to experimentalism and as a way to question the function of art in its place of occurrence; art was meant to be a phenomenological or ontological event. In this sense, the notion of time and space are intertwined as duration within a place. Like minimalism in the US, neoconcretism in Brazil implicated time and space, activating the surrounding space in which the object was situated and, consequentially, evidencing the limits of this environment and the observer of the event. Neoconcrete artists employed time in their art as a means of suspending the frenzy of mass production. The objects were open to spectators’ interventions and presented without a closure in its compositional elements. In the practices of neoconcrete artists like Hélio Oiticica and Lygia Clark, the viewer would take on a radical position, for only through them could the work have any sense of completion. And so despite its apolitical position, their work was anchored in a social field and opened the possibility of thinking the function of art in society in a new way. The criticism of neoconcretism contributed to politicize the future generations of Brazilian artists, in which Meireles is include, maintaining in constant suspension the boundaries of the artistic practice in relation to its own history and in conjunction with other spheres of knowledge.
If before, concrete art was conceptualized in association with cybernetics and information theory, artists of Meireles’s generation emphasized its disruptive aspects. The concept of feedback in cybernetic theory was not used by Meireles and contemporaneous artists to control a system, rather, it was used to expose the system’s operations and insert noise within it. In this section I will analyze Meireles’ first works within the *Insertions* series, as well as contemporaneous explorations of disturbances within various systems undertaken by Brazilian artists.

Starting with Meireles’s contemporary, Antonio Manuel, who became known by obsessively exploring the system of information as a means of art production and aesthetic concern, we can trace a common theoretical influence of this generation. In Virgínia Gil Araújo’s dissertation, “Antonio Manuel – Uma Parada,” the art historian argues that Manuel was impacted by the ideas of the art critic Mário Pedrosa, who was influenced by the counterculture theories of Herbert Marcuse and was responsible for advancing the dilemma of the concrete and neoconcrete theoretical frameworks. Manuel, among other artists, was interested in a critique

79 Adams, “Drawing Beyond the Margins,” 92. Several of Meireles’s contemporaries shared his concern with their social and political context and search for a way to think about systems in its different layers of operations. Lesser-known artists such as Carmela Gross and Ivens Machado, for example, were also rethinking information systems and image reproduction in their artworks. In artworks like *Rolo* [Roll] (1974) by Ivens Machado and *Carimbos* [Stamps] (1977–78) by Carmela Gross, both artists investigated the issue of reproducibility and the supposed neutrality of the medium. In *Rolo*, Ivens Machado draws the lines of a notebook page in a mismatching manner in order to create small pockets of paint that appear like the product of a clogged of the machine. And in *Carimbos*, Carmela Gross replicated scribbles in stamps and reproduced them over and over again on a sheet of paper. The two artists were thus contradicting notions of expressiveness and gesture commonly associated with the drawing as well as revealing the industrial design flaws. Gross and Machado deal with systems, but they are not open to the idea of feedback. Rather, their creation process is similar to the one adopted by minimalist artists in America who were trying to avoid subjectivity.

of capitalist society in which individuals were identified with consumer products in such a way that they become defined by them.

The Marxist notions of alienation and exploitation are complicated by the complicity of unconscious desires and individual neuroses in a society replete with mass communicated, seductive images. For Pedrosa, drawing from Marcuse, an aesthetic form should reveal the obscure structure of the consumer society and initiate the liberation from it through the emancipation of artistic practice. The contribution of the artist would be the denunciation of and liberation from consumerism through the retelling of the historical facts—which would reshape the viewer’s perception, understanding, and sensibility.

As Araújo has argued in her work, Pedrosa suggested that aesthetic form should scrutinize all mechanisms of image reproduction in a consumer society and artists should “correct reality” by reinventing everyday life. With this in mind, Manuel drew from newspapers in several of his projects (some of which were exhibited in Hélio Oiticica’s installation, Tropicália [1967]). These drawings were made with crayon or ink on newspapers that were in regular circulation in the city. In some works, the sheet was almost completely covered by black ink that formed outlined images of creatures. The intent was to obscure the information broadcasted by newspapers while simultaneously mapping the structure of the page.


83 Araújo, “Uma Parada,” 18.

84 Araújo, “Uma Parada,” 27. The author describes Mário Pedrosa as the main art critic who introduced Marcusean theories to the Brazilian artistic milieu.
In these first interferences with mass media, the reach of his intervention was limited by what was there beforehand.

Since 1967, Manuel had made the student riots in Brazil, France, and other countries the central theme of his newspaper works. He collected the pressed molds found in garbage containers at the main newspaper offices in Rio de Janeiro (O Globo, Jornal do Brasil, Correio da Manhã, O Paiz), and then he manipulated those forms to exaggerate crucial information that had been deleted or misrepresented by the editors. In O Pau, A Pedra [The Stick, The Stone] (1968), Manuel took the newspaper’s flan—a cardboard matrix that results from lead-plate printing techniques—and used ink to erase their headlines, which contained biased comments about the student protests in Rio de Janeiro (Figure 9).

Works including As Armas do Diálogo [Weapons Dialogue], Polícia Militar Mata Estudante [Military Police Kills Student], and A Imagem da Violência [Image’s Violence] were among the twenty works on flans made by Manuel in 1968. Hélio Oiticica called Manuel’s contributions “renotícia,” [renews] because they dealt with drawing and engraving as a means of communicating the repressive Brazilian situation. Collecting, retelling, and archiving were the tools that Manuel utilized to illustrate the failings of numerous systems: capitalism, militarism, and art.

Meireles began to work with newspapers in the late 1960s. At the time he was living in Rio de Janeiro and mingling with its artistic community. He was also concerned with systems of information and discussions concerning the art world within an industrial culture. Meireles’s approach, unlike that of Manuel, encompassed not simply the newspaper transmitting process but

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85 Araújo, “Uma Parada,” 43.
the newspaper as a system. While Manuel seems to be exploring the newspaper as one particular form of informational dissemination, Meireles is trying to grasp what a system is by manipulating the available channels of information. Meireles sees the system by means of those particular characteristics of the medium he is exploring. Thus, the characteristics of a newspaper such as its regularity, its feedback propriety (implicated in the advertising section) and its enunciative mechanism were all investigated by Meireles. He knew that an advertising section of a newspaper was in fact the only section in which readers could insert a message that would be read without censorship. Even so, his message had to be encoded and discovered by a regular reader, as puzzle to be discovered through time.

Meireles’s first Insertions project consisted of two newspaper advertisements published in the Jornal do Brasil in 1970, both of which gesture to environmental issues (Figure 10). The first ad was published in January and the second in June. Typically, space purchased in a newspaper is filled with as much information as possible and messages are conveyed in a fast and concise way. In the first installment of the Insertions series, which he introduced on January 13, 1970, Meireles bought classified space in order to create what he had called a clareira or clearing. Instead of introducing text, he emptied the area of the informational field with a blank space.86 He submitted exact specifications to the classified department of the newspaper, dictating the exact proportion of white space in his ad to the minimal text he included to designate the work with a title. [Despite his instructions, however, employees tried to enhance the legibility of the announcement by enlarging the letters of the title. In so doing, they inadvertently changed the sense of emptiness and insignificance Meireles sought in his

86 Scovino, Cildo Meireles, 247.
advertisement. They also unintentionally misspelled the artist’s first name. The published text read as follows: “Area n° 1 Gildo [sic] Meireles 1970.”

By emptying out a portion of an ordinary newspaper page, Meireles suspended the system of everyday communication mechanisms. The empty, white space on the page suggested an absence of meaning ascribed to the processes of communication as mediated by the newspaper. It presented the author as little more than the occupant of that space—a name connected to the absence of words, which indicated the purpose of the advertisement. As Beverly Adams has argued, in this sense, the message seemed like a failure on the part of the system.  

Meireles says that this work was inspired by a Lucio Costa’s speech about Brasília. Costa said that he began his urban planning project for the new capital of Brazil by drawing a cross to demarcate the territory.

In his Insertions in Newspaper, Meireles sought to breach the city’s system of information, which was then controlled by the government. It seems that in order to spur miscommunication in the informational system, Meireles needs to establish a degree of silence. By usurping certain mechanisms, symbols, and discourses already established, he intends to eliminate them. This procedure is a preparatory action in his practice so that Meireles may communicate something unknown in the art world. In the case of the insertion in the newspapers, it is the circuit of capital in the level of real estate speculative procedures in civil society which need in Meireles’s view to be disarticulated. Ecological concerns were starting to be debated in an increasingly globalized world, and this debate entailed the many complications and side


effects of industrialization and the growth of the world’s population. An allusion to the cutting of trees, the raw material from which paper is made, was made through the lack of ink on the paper. There is a parallel between the lack of letters in the newspaper and lack of trees in a devastated area. Paradoxically, clearing is an early action needed for Meireles to occupy a space, to claim an environmental discourse that he will infer in the following insertion in the newspapers.

Yet, this first experience of Meireles with the newspaper reveals that the feedback principle in a complex system has unintended consequences, even if it is a simple misunderstanding from those who are executing the project. This unpredictable characteristic of an open system generates a tension that is fundamental to the way I will analyze the function of feedback in the Insertions series at large. Feedback, in other words, has both intentional and unintentional consequences and it is the tension between the two facts indicative of the later reception of the Insertions.

Meireles’s Insertions into Newspaper could be understood as noise inserted into the communication system on two levels: first, with regard to the production of an empty space within an ostensible field of information, and second, with regard to execution mistakes leading to misinterpretation. Firstly and intentionally, Meireles’s advertisement now fails to communicate according to the terms of its context; it does not give to readers the possibility to respond the ad. Secondly, and even if unintentionally, the misspelling on the part of the newspaper’s staff allowed Meireles to call attention to the inaccurate sentences published in official media. In short, he demonstrated that editing was a process of manipulating the news.  

89 In fact, Meireles work did not target censorship and manipulation of the media as did the works of Antonio Manuel.
Meireles’s work was so subtle that only today, when do we know his name and his intentions, that the work could be seen as the slight distortion of true events portrayed by the media. Although noise is always implicit in communication, generating a kind of uncertainty about what is understood in the process, in this case, noise was potentiated in the work’s reception, as it is demonstrated next.

Five months later, on June 3, 1970, Meireles’s name reappeared in the Jornal do Brasil’s classified section. In this second newspaper Insertion, Meireles wrote “Áreas–Extensas, Selvagens e Longínquas” [Areas–Extensive, Wild and Remote90] (Figure 11). He included a note that read: “cartas para Cildo Meireles” [write to Cildo Meireles91] and a mailing address in Rio de Janeiro. According to the artist, the advertisement was an allusion to deforestation in the Amazon rainforest.92 He sought to draw attention to the matter by simulating the sale of land in the region. By not providing any details—such as price, size, or the terms of the transaction, the message seems nebulous and illicit (which reflects the reality of deforestation).

Although this time Meireles offered an intentional possibility of feedback to the readers, his enigmatic message was hard to follow. Considering that there were months separating the publication of the messages, it was almost impossible for anyone to make a connection between these two pieces. No messages were sent to the address in the advertisement. Connecting the two advertisements could only have been made possible through the reception of the project inside the art world.


91 Ibid.

92 Cildo Meireles: Geografia do Brasil, exhibition catalogue (Rio de Janeiro: Artviva, 2001), 60. In Meireles’s statement for the catalogue he asserts that he was trying to sell the Amazon. See also Scovino, Cildo Meireles, 248. Meireles’s statement presented in this book is shorter but also refers to the Amazon.
In *Insertions into Newspaper*, Meireles subverted the typical function of advertisements by converting them into noninformative, nonutilitarian messages. Meireles’s engagement with environmental issues and the system of communication could be a misinterpretation of those systems in form of artwork. At best, this confusion between intentional and nonintentional noise could lead art historical writing to produce misinformation (because interpretations can supplant the work itself), and at worst, misunderstanding could negate any criticism and make the artworks invisible.

Having established the behavior of an open system and explained the broader context of the *systems aesthetics* and the *art systems* debate in the United States and Latin America, the next chapter turns to theorize the specific object of this research. Continuing the theoretical framework, the next chapter focuses on the most famous of Meireles’s projects of the series *Insertions into Ideological Circuits*, namely, the *Coca-Cola Project* and the *Banknote Project*. The second chapter investigates how the elements in the *Insertions* endow it with the characteristic of a dynamic complex system—or an open system.
CHAPTER 2—INSERTIONS AS OPERATION

This chapter describes the theoretical analysis of the elements that constitute the Insertions series. It first explains the variety of Meireles’s works denominated Insertions. Later, this chapter provides a theoretical discussion on how the Insertions series operates. Building on Dalia Judovitz’s scholarship, this chapter suggests a parallel between Marcel Duchamp’s and Meireles’s artistic practices. More specifically, it explores similarities between Duchamp’s readymade operating beyond the museum and Meireles’s Insertions circulating in different social systems through the notion of the artwork’s reproducibility. It suggests that both the readymade and the Insertions operate through the new versions of works circulating in the art world. These new versions are produced by the artists, and also by the audience in the case of the Insertions. Finally the last section of this chapter places language as a major element of conceptual practices. It draws from the scholarship of Liz Kotz to unveil how the Insertions series operates using language. It elucidates the feedback and recirculation of the Insertions as the major factors for understanding the Insertions as an open system. What follows in this chapter sets the theoretical framework that establishes the specificities of the Insertions as system.

Insertions and its Variables

It is important to clarify that the term Insertions appears in several of Meireles’s works. In fact, Insertions is subdivided into three series with different projects: Insertions into Newspaper (conceptualized in 1969 and realized 1970), Insertions into Ideological Circuits (1970–ongoing), and Insertions into Anthropological Circuits (1971–1973). The first version, Insertions into Newspaper, was made in Brazil with newspaper classifieds. There are two iterations of this project that appear in catalogues. The second version of the Insertions series,
Insertions into Ideological Circuits: Coca-Cola Project and Banknote Project, was made in Brazil and the United States in the 1970s. The Banknote Project is a worldwide ongoing project, and the Tate Modern most recently documented it online. The last version of the series, Insertions into Anthropological Circuits: Black Comb and Token, was made in the United States and documented a few years later in Brazil. The Black Comb project never came to life; there are only sketches of this project circulating in exhibition catalogues and magazines.

Meireles wrote the first text about the Insertions series in April of 1970. The text was presented one year later in a debate, “Perspectives for a Brazilian Art,” at the Museum of Modern Art in Rio de Janeiro. In 1975, it was published in Malasartes magazine, which also included an explanation of the project. In this first and more concise version of the text, Meireles reflects upon the legacy of Marcel Duchamp.

In 1981, the text appeared in the first book dedicated exclusively to Meireles, published by FUNARTE (National Arts Foundation of the Brazilian Ministry of Culture). The book also included texts by the art critics Ronaldo Brito and Eudoro de Sousa. It contains part of a statement that Meireles submitted to the artist Antonio Manuel for his research “Ondas do Corpo” [Body Waves] in 1978. This statement further expounds upon the idea of Insertions, and I consider it another form of feedback or Meireles’s own insertion into the conceptualization of the series.

The latest version of the text was revised for the catalogue of Meireles’s exhibition at New York’s New Museum of Contemporary Art, at the Museum of Modern Art in Rio de Janeiro and São Paulo in 1999–2000. In this version, new reflections were added to earlier versions of the text.
The works *Zero Cruzeiro* and *Zero Centavo* (both conceptualized in 1974 and realized in 1978) and *Zero Dollar* and *Zero Cent*, (both conceptualized in 1978 and realized in 1984), do not bear the *Insertions* title—nor are they registered in any series with that name. However, Meireles’s exploits the circulation of capital in these works, and therefore, they merit analysis within the context of *Insertions*. In fact in an interview for *Material Language* (2008), Meireles told Frederico Morais that *Zero Cruzeiro* and *Zero Dollar* could be considered *Insertions into Anthropological Circuits*.93

In 2008, Tate Modern catalogued twenty-two stamped banknotes in their online database.94 They were presented to the museum by Meireles in 2006, and many of them were not published previously. They were presented under the title *Insertions into Ideological Circuits 2: Banknote Project*. They are all dated 1970 despite the fact that some of the banknotes were created by the central banks in different countries after that date. The *Coca-Cola Project* was also catalogued in a picture featuring three bottles. The first includes the text, “Yankees Go Home!” The second features a Coca-Cola drawing and the following sentence: “Molotov, pavio, fita adesiva, gasolina.” And in the third bottle displays the text, “Which is the place of the work of art?” [sic] Curiously, none of them have the instruction written onto the bottles. This suggests that audience participation was not envisioned in those versions of the series, which makes their operations wholly distinct from the first version in which Meireles incites public participation in his project. This is most likely to impoverish the readings and interpretations of the work. Meireles may have sought to avoid unauthorized production of the work on the part of galleries hoping to sell his objects for a tidy profit. Though Meireles’s may have had a sound strategy for

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93 Scovino ed., *Cildo Meireles*, 220.

presenting those objects, the reproducibility of the series and the feedback generated by the series should be accounted in the series’ history as an ongoing project—even if they run counter to the artist’s intentions. After all, if Meireles intended his work to be democratic and participative, collecting the series’ feedback would be a significative way of attaining a fully understanding of its impact in society.\textsuperscript{95}

**Coca-Cola as a Readymade: Meireles’s Appropriation of Duchamp’s Strategy**

This section focuses on the first version of the *Insertions into Ideological Circuits* series, more precisely, the *Coca-Cola Project*. Besides criticizing U.S. imperialism, Meireles was interested in how to critique. He wondered about the formal aspects of his work and how the language and materiality of his work would be intertwined. Meireles’s formal concerns also included the recognition of art history and the desire to insert his own work into this field. Therefore, just as Duchamp appropriated art history through images of the *Mona Lisa* (and through artistic procedures that became mechanisms for creating readymades), Meireles appropriated Duchamp’s readymade strategy. In this way, Meireles’s actions infused feedback into the art world itself. His *Coca-Cola Project* provides evidence of such feedback by bringing together Duchamp’s readymade strategies, the imagery of pop art, and language used in conceptual art.

As instigated by Marcel Duchamp in 1913, the readymade called into question the whole retinal tradition in the creative process of art.\textsuperscript{96} For the artist, the creative act should not be

\textsuperscript{95} In the appendix of this dissertation, it is provided, in chronological order, images of the texts that Meireles wrote.

\textsuperscript{96} Giulio Carlo Argan, *Arte Moderna* (São Paulo: Schwarcz, 1992), 438.
limited to the manual and technical realization of an object that seeks to represent reality. Thus, Duchamp used industrial materials and reproductions of art history icons to make his work. Sometimes, he composed them; other times, he simply signed them and exhibited them in galleries. This gesture generated hypotheses about the value of art as influenced by the reproducibility of art images in an age of mass reproduction.

One could argue that Meireles’s *Coca-Cola Project* harnesses an industrialized object to question the status of art. The process utilized by Duchamp in *Fountain* (1917), however, differs in a significant way. Whereas Duchamp stated that he sought indifference and meaningless in the industrialized object, Meireles sought in his readymades symbolic objects with geopolitical potential. Meireles’s readymade questioned the pretense of neutrality within the realm of industrialized objects. Although both Duchamp and Meireles thought about the circulation of their objects, they imagined the reception of their objects differently. Also, Duchamp later produced miniatures of *Fountain* and other readymade objects (thus questioning the value of the original and the position of the art object in the art world), but Meireles sought a participatory element in the production of art objects.

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99 Scovino, *Cildo Meireles*, 232. In a 2008 interview reprinted in this book, Frederico Morais asks Meireles whether he agrees with the authors who situate the *Insertions* series in opposition to the Duchampian readymade. Meireles answers: “Well the bottle of the *Coca-Cola Project* is a readymade, as well the one cruzeiro banknote, of the *Banknote Project*, on which one can read the stamped question: Who Killed Herzog? The two concepts are not opposed. Between the readymade and the *Insertions into*
Issues of authorship, audience, and the art object (as discussed by Benjamin Buchloh in his essay, “Conceptual Art 1962–1969: From the Aesthetic of Administration to the Critique of Institutions”) were also problematized by Meireles’s *Insertions.* If they could be understood as inferring what Buchloh called a proto-conceptual or conceptual work—which operates an aesthetic of administration by questioning the art institution—they would differ in the way they were (ideally) operated by the public. Whereas Buchloh asserted that Daniel Buren’s critique of Duchamp’s model was aimed at obscuring the institutional apparatus that made his readymade possible in the first place, Meireles’s reading of Duchamp’s model surprisingly clarified the art object within the institutional system. Meireles’s interpretation positions the art object in a broader context and reveals its lesser power of a virulent agent inside the culture. Ultimately, Meireles paid homage to Duchamp’s readymade as the most important artistic act of the twentieth century. In Meireles’s own words:

Duchamp’s intervention in the art system was in terms of the logic of the art object. Any intervention in this sphere today—given that culture, rather than an exclusive sphere of art, is now the subject—is necessarily a political intervention. *For if aesthetics is the basis of art, politics is the basis of culture.*

*Ideological Circuits* there are no opposite meanings, but different directions. The readymade can be defined, simply, as a product that, when removed from its industrial series, it is reified by a subjective intervention of the artist, and as such, maintains its condition of unique artwork, with its authorial characteristics. That allows its museological retrieval. The *Insertions into Ideological Circuits* travel along a very large flow, adding information capable of generating counter-information. They operate a synthesis that radically redefined the process. They could be called handmade, because they transform the object that has already been made into something else. They must be seen as actions and not as art objects. They are characterized by interactivity. They exist to be plagiarized—as action. And if by any chance they arrive at the museums, they will be displayed as examples of actions accompanied by precise instructions about how to act.” See also the two articles by Ramírez that describe the opposition between the readymade and its interpretation by Latin American artists: “Blueprints Circuits” and “Tactics for Thriving on Adversity.”


Meireles’s interests on culture and participation may have stemmed in part from his dialogue with the neoconcrete artists and the “Theory of the Non-Object” proposed by the Brazilian critic Ferreira Gullar in 1960. In this article, Gullar asserts that artists that were dealing with the space in between painting and sculpture were trying to break through the limits of culture and establish a “work of art within the space of reality, lending to this space, through the apparition of the work—this special object—significance and transcendence.” According to Gullar, Duchamp’s readymade already pointed to this direction of an intersection between fictional and real objects and the only limit Gullar saw in the readymade logic was that the object could be engulfed by the commonality that it belongs to in the first place, since the formal aspects of it were less important or not important at all. Meireles’s Coca-Cola Project kept the main concerns with the usage of the object in everyday life, but added to it an unexpected use through its inscriptions/instructions—attributing to the “thing” an irrefutable characteristic that would make the engulfment impossible. One could not assert these inscriptions as being a commentary about the definition of art itself (the tautological aspect posed by Joseph Kosuth); neither have they had the indifference of the object sought by Duchamp or the pop artists. The conceptual operation of the inscriptions in Meireles’s work is closer to the tendency launched by

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104 Buchloh, “Conceptual Art 1962–1969,” 105–143. Buchloh discusses the tautological aspects of Kosuth’s artistic practice. One of the Kosuth’s most important articles, “Art After Philosophy” (1969) reprinted in Joseph Kosuth, Art after Philosophy and After: Collected Writings, 1966–1990 (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1991). In this article, Kosuth delves into Marcel Duchamp readymades and their legacy on modern art. He concludes that, “Works of art are analytic propositions. That is, if viewed within their context—as art—they provide no information whatsoever about any matter of fact. A work of art is a tautology in that it is a presentation of the artist’s intention, that is, he is saying that that particular work of art is art, which means, is a definition of art. Thus, that it is art is true a priori (which is what Judd means when he states that ‘if someone calls it art, it’s art’).”
John Cage in its musical notation process and which this study will further develop in next section *Fonema + Fenômeno = Fonômeno* [Phoneme + Phenomenon = Phonemono].

According to art historian Dalia Judovitz, Duchamp’s readymade objects question the nature of art in the age of the mechanical reproduction of images. In the more traditional way of thinking about art, an original object is assumed to have a direct link to its producer, the artist. But when the capacity to reproduce images of an original object was established in modern times, there was a severing of the unique relationship between “the work and the artist, as well as the valuative inscription of the art objects. In doing so, it redefines the notion of value as no longer inherent to the actual production of an object, but rather, as generated through its technical and social reproduction.” Thus, for Judovitz, the social and technical reproduction of an object instills value in an object. This relationship between original and copy, however, can be quite complex, as seen in Duchamp’s *L.H.O.O.Q.* (1919). This work depicts a printed image of Leonardo da Vinci’s *Mona Lisa*, but Duchamp has drawn a mustache and goatee on the woman’s face. The idea of the original object breaks down because the object in question is a reproduction—and between this reproduction and any other, there will be a delay in the assignation of value to the object, which occurs only when the reproduction enters the art world.

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105 Scovino, *Cildo Meireles*, 166–167. Meireles tells Hans-Ulrich Obrist about his interest in language as a tool to enable anyone to replicate his instructions at any time. Meireles believes some of his works exist in between a phoneme and a phenomenon, that is, they work as language operating in time, words that can be said (and are connected to an oral tradition) and words that can be acted upon them, as an event provoke by performing the instructions.


107 Ibid., 121.
It is in this interval that Duchamp’s readymade strategies operate. These strategies go beyond exploring the impact of modern reproducibility on definitions of art—Duchamp was also interested in the “speculative potential of the concept of artistic reproduction.” For Judovitz, Duchamp’s artistic interests are revealed through the concept of multiples. As Judovitz explains, multiples are reproductions accompanied by gestures of the artist that confer certain originality on the objects though they are neither objects of art, nor mere reproductions of originals. Multiples fall somewhere between the two states. The *Fountain* (1938—1958) miniatures illustrate the concept of multiples lucidly.

Judovitz expounds upon the fact that *Fountain* triggered a controversy from the beginning as to its status as a work of art. Despite having been refused in the Salon des Indépendants and never having been exhibited, the work had a significant impact on the artistic milieu. Exposure to the work, however, was fueled by Alfred Stieglitz’s photograph, which was published in the journal *The Blind Man* and accompanied by an unsigned editorial on the work. More importantly, though, Duchamp brought this early piece into the limelight by creating new reproductions and miniatures of *Fountain* later in life.

Indeed, the miniatures and duplicates were multiples of an object that was never an original because the original was an industrialized urinal that was only made public by means of photographic documentation. The multiples were included in the history of the work, which added to the work’s meaning and complexity. In fact, the accrual of new versions of the work

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108 Ibid., 123.
109 See also: an illustrated typology list of *Fountain* in Camfield, *Marcel Duchamp Fountain*, 162–165.
endowed it with a certain openness that only ended with Duchamp’s death. (Nevertheless, as a strategy, it lived on in the work of other artists).

For both Duchamp and Meireles, the compulsion to reproduce images and objects stemmed from their environment. Consequently, Meireles shares Duchamp’s concern with the definition of art in the age of mechanical reproduction. But Meireles’s unique challenge was to reveal the circulation of the art object, to reframe the reproducibility of work as a democratic assault on dictatorship, and to insert his own work into the social and artistic systems.

In the Coca-Cola Project, Meireles executed a strategy similar to that of Duchamp’s by appropriating an industrial object that was both an icon in art history and a household name. He chose the Coca-Cola bottle not only because it symbolized American culture and consumer industry, but also because it was an emblem of 1960s pop art. Furthermore, the images of pop art (which bore a resemblance to advertising) are intrinsically ambivalent: they simultaneously praise and critique mass culture.

Meireles presents the materiality of the Coca-Cola product as an expansion of the scope of Duchamp’s readymade because it collapsed various social systems (art, industrial, and capitalist systems). Through the readymade Coca-Cola bottle, Meireles asks two vital questions: In the interval between production and reproduction, during which an object gains social value, where does it circulate? Who endows this object with value?

Though these questions will likely incite debate, this dissertation contends that the object circulates in the culture and ordinary citizens and agents of the art world (dealers, art historians, collectors, and critics) endow it with value. Moved by various interests—including the pursuit of national sovereignty—these ordinary citizens transform the ordinary object. Thus, Coca-Cola bottle also suggests the cultural dominance of Americans as agents with power to confer value and legitimize the definition of art in the twentieth century. But this conclusion is only clear in Meireles’s future versions of the Coca-Cola Project, when he poses the following question: “Which is the place of art?” Although the structure of this question is strained by an obvious language barrier, its meaning is clear. And, the meaning behind these later versions seems to echo the conceptual weight of Duchamp’s work.

Whereas Duchamp inserted multiples of Fountain into the systems of art, Meireles inserted new information into additional Coca-Cola bottles. Meireles’s processes can be understood as feedback, as this study prefers to call it, of the first object exhibited at INFORMATION. In other words, the series is conceived as a project in constant circulation. Interestingly, although Meireles designed the Coca-Cola Project to have a wider cultural scope, it only works within the strictures of the readymade strategy. After all, in order to question and expose the limits of artistic conventions, the work needs to move within the art world.

It is also worth noting that Meireles’s act of writing instructions and messages on the Coca-Cola bottles and signing them endows them with a certain degree of originality, especially when one realizes that the public first made contact with the work in the institutional space of the museum. Still, it is in the interval between the first exhibit and the production of the

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111 Judovitz, Unpacking Duchamp.
new bottles in Brazil that Meireles demonstrated the reproducibility of the work and implied a multiple authorship.

Ultimately, Meireles must be understood as emulating Duchamp’s emphasis on the reproducibility of the industrial production process. In this reproducibility, Meireles understands the economic terms of the creative act through which artistic value becomes inextricably linked to the recirculation of the object. Thus, reproducibility became pivotal in Meireles’s conceptualization of the *Insertions* series. Meireles prompts the viewer to participate in the production and circulation of the object through the inclusion of instruction. In this way, he imitated the anonymity of the industrial process, suggesting a certain dilution of the object’s authorship. And even if someone could add new, critical information to the Coca-Cola bottles, he or she would only be adding to the aggregate, authorless feedback of Meireles’s series—especially if the new information reached a sizable audience.

As for the bottles that did not reach the public via exhibitions, they must be thought of as acting outside the art world (i.e., regular Coke bottles)—because they do not infiltrate the art world, and they do not add to the construction of meaning of *Insertions*. In other words, the meaning they add is only hypothetical; it is not processed through the systems of art (museums, galleries, and publications). This does not mean that Meireles’s readymades did not work; on the contrary, they function as readymades—both alluding to a readymade strategy and citing it literally. The objects maintain their subversive force (encouraging public participation in the

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112 Judovitz, *Unpacking Duchamp*, 123. According to Judovitz, artistic conventions are established by Duchamp as readymade procedures, which means that Meireles’s use of Duchamp’s strategy is in itself a readymade procedure. Judovitz’s furthers this notion by stating, “Playing with the notion of artistic reproduction, Duchamp redirects the viewer’s gaze from the object to the artistic conventions defining its appearance. Duchamp’s effort to highlight artistic convention is visible in a set of later works, *TORTURE-MORTE* and *sculpture-morte*—relief sculptures whose exaggerated realism may be
process of industrialization and the politicization of culture), and the actual objects point to a political disruption effected through the manipulated industrial design.

In Meireles’s message-in-a-bottle practice, he initiated an action that he believed could be political if the public acted upon it. For the artist, the work existed in the appropriation and public interpretation of his idea. And if the realizations of the project could have as many variations as there were readings of his instructions, the success of his project would not necessarily require that people reproduce new messages in Coca-Cola bottles or banknotes. Rather, they could use any ideological system to insert different messages into myriad objects.

Meireles himself, when questioned about the meaning of his series, claims that the Coca-Cola Project was a precursor for the “real” project that came out later, Banknote Project.113 This statement makes one wonder why he reconsidered the Coca-Cola Project practice for his next piece. Was it due to the adept craftsmanship necessary to print on the glass bottles (which would make it difficult for new instructions to be added)? Was it because the bottle recycling program was being discontinued? Was it due to Coca-Cola’s connection to American pop artists (from which Meireles was perhaps interested in distancing himself)? Was the corporate icon simply not as effective at critiquing capitalism as money itself? Meireles was not able to answer these questions at the time. Regardless of the reasoning behind rethinking his initial project, the

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113 Indeed, the Banknote Project was sent to MoMA for the same exhibition, but it was made after the Coca-Cola Project. My choice to focus on the Coca-Cola Project is due to the visual record of the image; there are no pictures of the Banknote Project displayed at MoMA. In addition, the Coca-Cola Project is more famous than the Banknote Project.

114 Antonio Manuel, “Ondas do Corpo” (1978), reprinted at Scovino, Cildo Meireles, 84. Meireles states that the Coca-Cola Project acted almost as a metaphor for the real project, the Banknote Project.
criticism it received certainly helped generate new and interesting ideas that he implemented and conceptualized afterward. This shift in the focus of the series is further addressed in later chapters of this dissertation.

At this point, one might logically infer that Meireles’s interest in finding another way to express his criticism derives from the limits of the Coca-Cola bottle circulation system. The banknote system consists of infinite destinations for its objects. Whereas the Coca-Cola soft drink is attached to the idea of consumerism—a good that someone may or may not buy—the banknote’s meaning is mired in controversy. To buy a Coca-Cola bottle, you need money. And unlike the soda, money (as a medium) has a free flow. The temptation to keep a banknote because it has an interesting message stamped on it is less powerful than the urgency to use the money for the value inscribed on it—particularly if the message requires only a mechanical stamp that could be attributed to anyone. This unexpected medium plays an important role in the series because it marks the sudden reversal of the ordinary use of an object or system and encourages public interaction with it.

Thus, Meireles aimed to engage the public in his de-skilled artistic practice and expand the creative act beyond the traditional system of art. Although this agitprop would fit an American or Brazilian context, it requires the limits of the “condition of art.” In order for awareness of the currency or the bottles to grow—and in order to suppress the language barrier—they needed the territory of a system of art capable of translating and making legible such a proposal. Thus, Meireles’s concern with ideological circuits remains fixed and extends the

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115 Joseph Kosuth, *Art after Philosophy and After*, Collected Writings, 1966–1990, ed. Gabriele Guercio (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1991). Joseph Kosuth refers to the “art condition” before and after Duchamp. The latter is strictly associated with the institutional art or the art world in which art can be recognized as art. Kosuth states, “A work of art is a kind of proposition presented within the context of art as a comment on art.”
idea that an institutional system of art can give meaning to his project. Maybe for that reason (when questioned about the *Insertions* series), Meireles always refused to call them artworks or social activism. After all, it would take complete audience participation to fulfill the goal of attaining true publicity or spawning more robust audience engagement. Often, works focusing in such participation are organized and controlled by the artists in ongoing projects (as is the case in some contemporary artistic practices). Meireles, however, chose not to systematically organize the feedbacks engendered by his series audience. As time went on, he could have elaborated mechanisms for collecting and showing public participation (as many artistic proposals do today). He could have integrated reports and photographs on a Web site that allowed both the artist and the public to contribute to the project. Instead, Meireles seems to prefer to maintain some degree of uncertainty about the responses to his series.

**Fonema + Fenômeno = Fonômeno**

In the 1960’s, the “linguistic turn” in critical theory and philosophy took place at the same time in which artists were using language and its procedures as visual material, combining it with poetry, object, action and photography. Artists were taking language as a source of investigation in its structural and material potential inside the page. Words were investigated in the relationship they could establish with the blank space of the paper sheet. Compared and taken as the gallery’s white cube, the page was seen as a space for actions permanently in circulation like the language system it carries. Many of these investigations were further explorations of the material developed by concrete and visual poetry from the 1950s. In the United States, the poets John Ashbery and Jackson Mac Low were particularly influential to visual artists who were...
interested in random and nonlinear uses of language.\textsuperscript{117} In Brazil, former concrete artists were trying to advance the achievements of the concrete poets like Augusto de Campos, Haroldo de Campos and Décio Pignatari into modalities of the visual arts other than the two-dimensional condition of the page. Waldemar Cordeiro’s \textit{Probabilistic Self-Portrait} (1967) is one of the many works in which language operations migrate to the three-dimensional space of the object. In this moment of his career, Cordeiro also combined the words materiality of concrete poetry and pop art appropriation of media and readymade objects. In his \textit{popcretos}, the language, its uses and attributions, are central procedures (Figure 12).

But, what are the procedures that would be particularly developed in the 1970s that would open up the debates around what became termed “conceptual art” and later “conceptualism”. Conceptual art should be investigated under a new light in which the suppression of the object in favor of strategies using information is not at the core of the conceptual practice. According to Kotz, it is pressing to understand how the 1970’s artists were distancing themselves from practices based in performance models of spectator’s interaction common in Fluxus, neoconcrete art, and happenings and rethinking the notion of process and detaching it from an object.\textsuperscript{118} Since language was a main material for many conceptual artists who were not exclusively concerned about words’ appearance and behavior, we should investigate in which ways language was intertwined with other mediums complexifying artists’ messages and practices.

The indication that language was used in a more dynamic and complex way than that in which the first critics’ assumption could grasp, is evidenced by the resistance that some artists

\textsuperscript{117} Ibid., 100.
\textsuperscript{118} Ibid., 175.
had towards the term and to the categorization of their work under the framework of conceptual art. Meireles did not like the idea of been considered a conceptual artist, most particularly if one is considering conceptual art as those propositions primarily devoted to language operations.\(^{119}\) The artist made, at the beginning of his career, only a few works completely devoted to language propositions that were score events pieces. In these pieces, *Estudo para Espaço* [Study for Space] (Figure 15), *Estudo para Tempo* [Study for Time] (Figure 13), and *Estudo para Espaço/Tempo* [Study for Space/Time] (Figure 14) all from 1969, Meireles typewrote on three different white sheets instructions suggesting actions to be done by the readers in another place other than that of the gallery space. These three pieces belong to the artist’s private collection and are rarely exhibited or found in photographic form. In *Estudo para Tempo* [Study for Time], he wrote:

> “Numa praia ou deserto, cavar um buraco (do tamanho que quizer) na areia, sentar-se e esperar, em silêncio, até que o vento o preencha inteiramente” [On a beach or in a desert, dig a hole (of a size of your choice) in the sand, sit down and wait until the wind fills it entirely].\(^{120}\)

Meireles is suggesting to viewers to experience life scenarios in a different perspective, provoking a situation in which one could observe the wind effect on the sand, undermining one’s effort in creating a permanent hole on the ground, or otherwise, in making someone’s perception about passing time to be felt through the effects of the wind dragging the sand into the hole until it would be gone. This piece has no photographs, no objects associated to it. It could be easily related with post-Cagean aesthetics, despite the territorial distances that separates Meireles from his former American counterparts.

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\(^{120}\) Shorter version printed at Scovino, *Cildo Meireles*, 18–19.
In her book, *Words to Be Looked At*, Liz Kotz argues that the discourse John Cage initiated with *4’33”* (1952) acts as a precursor for the practices developed by artists after him. His successors combined language with objects, actions, performances, and photography in a complex aesthetics that blossomed in the sixties and seventies. Cage’s piece had a substantial impact on the visual arts and conceptual art (as it was later termed). Even though the use of advertisement language in pop art—or even cubism—is overstated by many authors, Kotz argues that Cage’s specific contribution entails using language as a means of transforming musical notation in “instructions, schema, or template for works constructed in all types of media.”

The score for *4’33”* consists of three distinct periods of silence. Cage provides instructions for the performer so he or she knows how to execute the score. Beyond its usual reading as a performative event, the score itself plays a major role in Kotz’s analysis because every reading activates a different realization of the piece.

Notions that Cage introduced with *4’33”* were further explored by Vito Acconci in pieces such as *Text* (1969). In that work, language appears as a “readerly performance” in which the constraints of language are revealed. Acconci’s poetry is seen by Kotz as an attempt to go beyond the minimalist methodological procedures—such as cutting, removing, tearing, displacing—and integrate actions such as jumping, biting, and rubbing into his own performance. Eventually, he developed works that employ other people to conduct the actions. “While many actions do not entail speech or talk, language is preserved at another level, to

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122 Ibid., 164.
generate conventions that structure actions: a subject acts on an object, acts on itself, uses other subjects as surrogates to act, acts on others subjects and so forth.\textsuperscript{123}

For Kotz, Acconci’s pieces deviate considerably from the Cagean idea that performative actions should engender an anarchic society. Rather, they are a remembrance of the coercive forces at play in both language and performance. This does not mean, however, that Acconci’s pieces were totally immune to chance and unforeseen feedback—in language and performed actions, inconsistencies sprout up as by-products of those systems. His text-based works—in combination with his spatial concerns in performance—resulted in the oversimplification of language in his investigations. He engendered an almost “antireferential and dysfunctional language systems”\textsuperscript{124} that would be later further investigated by artists interested in the contextual properties of language in politically charged strategies to address institutional systems. These artists include Hans Haacke, Adrian Piper, and Martha Rosler (in the United States) and Antonio Manuel and Cildo Meireles (in Brazil).

Cage used language as the basis for the score pieces. He considered the event the main act, the artful component of the artistic proposition. For him and for the Fluxus artists, photography or any kind of record of the events were disregarded or even repressed as constitutive elements of the art exhibition system. What came to the fore in the beginnings of conceptual practices is the second order information, or the system of representational media entailed in the art practice. To prove her argument, Kotz suggests a fresh reading of Kosuth’s famous One and Three Chairs (1965) not as an exercise on redundancy and equivalence of the three elements, text, photography and the object, but rather a shift from language used as a

\textsuperscript{123} Ibid., 167.
\textsuperscript{124} Ibid., 174.
performative-base mode to language as a photographic model. This fact, instead of being a
semiotic reductionism (considered by Buchloh, Ramírez and many others, as mentioned earlier
in this dissertation), it increases the instabilities of the signs, because despite Kosuth’s attempts
to distance the artistic practice of the gap between his ideas and the materials he used to realize
them, affirming that ‘art’ was ideas in his mind, he fell back on photography as an reference to
present the work in different exhibitions, which brings an unexpected performative structure to
the different presentations of his work. Through a photograph of his work he produces the
instructions to museums and galleries on how to produce or reproduce his work. According to
Kotz:

For Kosuth, the general linguistic “statement” that permits specific realizations lies on the
boundary between the music score/performance “instruction” and the (mythical)
minimalist model of the fabrication ordered telephoned or sent to the factory, or the
certificates of ownership that certain minimal artists such as Dan Flavin and Donald Judd
used to authenticate works that could be reconstructed.\(^{125}\)

Thus, the work is a general notational system that produces specific realizations for every
context in which it takes place. Here, I want to stress that Kotz points to an understanding of the
artistic proposition, implicating the exhibition installation of the objects that she did not further
develop in her text. The fact that Kosuth used a photograph to instruct museum staff to rebuild
his work is not only an activation of the music score, the authenticity statement, or the minimalist
strategy, but also it is a complication of the system of art via a dismantling of the artist as the
only institutional producer.

Essentially, instructions and statements of authenticity collapse under the weight of
systems as an institutional artistic structure. When performed by the institutions of artistic

\(^{125}\) Ibid., 193.
legitimation, the instructions or statements of authenticity are coauthored by the system in which they are presented. In 1970, Meireles was commissioned to illustrate an article about Thereza Simões and Guilherme Vaz, and himself for the thirty-sixth issue of *Fairplay* magazine. Instead of creating an illustration or photographing his works, Meireles presented the receipt of the payment that the magazine gave to him in exchange for a sample of his work (Figure 16). This was an ideal submission for Meireles because the receipt allows the artistic practice and the system of art complicit with it.

Though the performance-based score of a post-Cagean practice sought the participation of an anonymous audience as a site of specific realization, when minimalist and early conceptual artists asked museum staff to rebuild their work, they revealed the fact that art making is part of a dynamic complex system. Consequently, the roles of the artist, curator, and exhibition become increasingly intertwined and problematic.

If conceptual art is a general proposition that generates different and context-specific realizations, each realization depends upon everyone who decides to carry out the instructions. Likewise, it depends upon the way in which the works are represented in catalogues, exhibitions, and art historical essays. One might reasonably assert that Kotz is right about a third element connecting language and objects. As she would say, if conceptual works (such as Kosuth’s *One and Three Chairs*, 1965) were capable of “linking the performance notations of Cage and Fluxus with the fabrication instructions of minimal art,” then it seems sensible to “posit the emergence in the 1960s of a new model for artistic production in which the work—be it object, image,
performance, or installation—is now a specific realization of general schema, and is seen to operate analogously to linguistic statements.”

The linguistic statements in Brazilian conceptual practices—and more precisely, in Meireles’s *Insertions* series—thoroughly investigated the contextual properties of language. Artists in Latin America confronted the context (as an extension of the system of art) because it implied art legitimation and sociopolitical territorial disputes. Thus, Meireles’s performance and fabrication instructions must be read through the lens of art legitimation and territorial conflicts. And if one agrees with Kotz that “words on a page [or other media] operate in relation to other texts and statements, since language as a system is perpetually in circulation,” one has to agree with Skrebowski that language is one of the systems that artists in the 1970s cared about. Therefore, using systems as medium exceeds the scope of using just language as a medium. It is for that reason that this research is investigating the linguistic behavior of the *Insertions* series and the social systems Meireles addressed in those works.

The sentences in *Coca-Cola Project* and *Banknote Project* consist of two blocks of information. The first appears as a headline that is written in uppercase: “Yankees Go Home!” This message was considered by David Evans (in his anthology, *Appropriation*) to be an *agitprop*. Evans used this term to describe works dealing with communist propaganda and works created by Lucy Lippard, Martha Rosler, and Cildo Meireles that addressed the Vietnam

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126 Ibid., 10.
127 Ibid., 138.
130 *Agitprop* means in the Babylon dictionary, “politically-oriented propaganda disseminated through art and/or literature (esp. Communist in nature); one who distributes propaganda; government agency which produces and distributes propaganda.”
War. The common denominator among the pieces and statements is the appropriation of imagery to make explicitly political works operate outside the institutional art world.  

This straightforward political propaganda was quite common in the anticapitalist atmosphere of the 1970s—a simplicity that Meireles complicated by choosing Coca-Cola bottles and dollar bills. One concrete poet, Décio Pignatari, preceded Meireles’s work by writing a visual poem in 1957 that considered Coca-Cola and the related modes of advertising (Figure 17). Pignatari equated drinking Coke with addiction and nausea. Meireles, on the other hand, took words to the level of a general schema via specific realizations for every context in which they were read. By outlining the instructions of production, he also created a system in which the realizations could operate as feedback to the operational system of bottle redistribution and money circulation.

When first examining the principle photograph of the Coca-Cola Project, its circularity becomes apparent. The object—the bottle containing the soft drink—was a product designed to be purchased by consumers in supermarkets and retail outlets in Brazil. If one did not wish to pay a surcharge for a new bottle of Coke, one had to return the empty bottle. In the United States, such a trade was not necessary, but there was a system in place to collect bottles in exchange for money (Figure 18).

The empty bottle was also a commodity, something with value insofar as it was used to create a new batch of soft drinks. Thus, the Coca-Cola bottle accessed the circulation of the factory’s industrial process, the dealer, and the consumer. The display of the bottle at three

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131 Evans, Appropriation, 16.
different times (full, half-empty, and empty) refers to the consumption of the product until the bottle is empty.\textsuperscript{132}

In the arrangement of objects created by Meireles there is the association of the bottle coming out of the factory, sealed and representing the ideology of the industrial product, in opposition to the information written by Meireles; then the half-consumed product with part of its message fading away due to the lack of contrast between the printed white letters and the black Coca-Cola liquid; and finally, there is the empty bottle.\textsuperscript{133}

Interestingly, for consumers to use the bottle as a means of insertion into the industrial circuit, they must consume the product; because it will only be possible to enter the system with new information if it is initially invisible, in order to get around any obstruction by the manufacturer.

Once the bottle is emptied, what is normally just another step in the process of soft drink consumption becomes full of symbolic potential. This is where the cycle would potentially begin again if we imagine that the objects presented in the exhibition actually circulate on the shelves of supermarkets and reach consumers. Even if the bottles never left the exhibition, and were always presented as works of art in museums and galleries, it is the reference they make to a different use of the system of consumption that endows them with a critical nature.

The banknotes used in the version presented at INFORMATION were not published in the exhibition catalogue. Until the 1990s, only versions of the \textit{Banknote Project} restamped on

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\textsuperscript{132} In subsequent decades, the product was designed as a disposable plastic bottle, where the product’s package and the process of consumption have no market value; it is disposed of in a completely invisible space, the garbage.

\textsuperscript{133} This description matches Figure 1. It is a picture taken circa 1980.
dollar bills made in 1985 (or another version with a different title that used Brazilian *Cruzeiro* in 1975) were published in catalogues (Figure 19 and Figure 20). There is no lasting proof besides the INFORMATION’s checklist at MoMA that Meireles presented the *Cruzeiro* and/or the dollar version at the exhibition, but he confirms that the text was in Portuguese. This is an important factor to consider when one contemplates the intended audience (American rather than Brazilian). Indeed, this ambiguity can be read as a failure in the first conceptualization of the work: Meireles believed that the public should be able to read what was written on the object.

This failure was later corrected through the feedback of the work written in English, which is the self-regulating characteristic of the system Meireles was manipulating. As the artist stated, the *Insertions* series is a work that grew with time. It began to enter the critical consciousness years later, when the artist was invited to participate in other international exhibitions in 1988 such as *Brazil Projects* at P.S.1 at the Institute for Art and Urban Resources in Long Island and *The Latin American Spirit* at the Bronx Museum of the Arts, both in New York City. Meireles noted (in a press conference at the P.S.1 for the exhibition) that Lygia Clark and Hélio Oiticica were his artistic references—even though he thought that other artists had a greater influence on him. Meireles believed that “putting the name of Hélio and Lygia into circulation like a kind of fonômeno [phonemono] would be strategically interesting. It was important to provoke this uncanniness and bring attention to what had happened in Brazil. Hélio and Lygia bring the literary ability of art to run in several directions.”[sic]135

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134 Oliveira, Cildo Meireles, interview with the author.

Meireles earlier described his *Insertions* series and other pieces he thought could be constructed by anyone, anywhere, any time. He explained that those works were based on language that represented phonemes and phenomena simultaneously. The instructions enabled people to produce the works by themselves. Meireles’s phonemonos are linguistic statements: they are score events, production instructions, and (albeit unintentionally) statements of authenticity; likewise, they are oral and written statements addressed to the art world (as his contribution to the press conference at P.S. 1 attests). His speech did not address his production; rather, he used the time to promote art historical interest in other artists from the same region.

This second chapter elaborated on the elements of the *Insertions* series that trigger the reproducibility, or more precisely, the feedback created by Meireles through the recirculation of new versions of the *Insertions* series in both the system of art and in the social fabric. Having this chapter elucidated the pivotal role played by the instructions written on the bottles or banknotes in the reproducibility and feedbacks of the series, the ensuing chapter describes the importance of the INFORMATION for emergent conceptual practices at that time. The

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INFORMATION show provides the scenario in which the *Insertions into Ideological Circuits* were introduced to the public. The ensuing chapters assess the *Insertions* following the chronological order of the events in which they were displayed. Chronological order is a necessary choice to assess Meireles’s *Insertions* because it demonstrates how the feedback appeared over time and reveals the inconsistency of previous arguments about the series debuting in the Brazilian consumer economy. Finally, the chronological order creates a certain hierarchy to virtually simultaneous and conflicting events narrated in the third, fourth and fifth chapters.
CHAPTER 3—INFORMATION

This third chapter focuses on the events related to INFORMATION. First, it describes Meireles’s production at the time he was invited to the exhibition. It explains the repressive situation of the art circuit in Brazil by explaining the government’s censorship of the VI Youth Biennial in Paris and artist reactions to it. It also describes the work by Meireles selected by Kynaston McShine for INFORMATION and suggests the possible reasons for the curator’s interest in Meireles’s artistic practice. Second, this chapter comments on the general impact of INFORMATION, and describes the installation of Meireles’s objects in the show. The display of the objects suggests that they might have been imperceptible for an American audience because of both a language barrier and the physical transparence of the bottles. This chapter also debates the alleged democratic attribute of the Coca-Cola soft drink and how this idea of a multinational corporation product was problematic for Brazilians. The chapter ends by reflecting on the reasons why the Insertions were read as a guerrilla practice and acknowledges the importance of this interpretation, despite its collapse of different versions of the series.

The Context of Production: Before INFORMATION

In 1969, a general and his military troop closed an exhibition at the Museum of Modern Art in Rio de Janeiro that was holding preselected works slated to head to the VI Youth Biennial in Paris that same year. Meireles was among the preselected artists. The brutal censorship spurred local artists to organize an international boycott of the 1969 X São Paulo Biennial because the exhibition was closely associated with conservative forces in the art field. The

137 Sheila Cabo, “Convite ao Político: Fotografia como Resistência,” Bilboquet # 8 Bárbaro, (October, 2007), at 3w.bilboquet.es.
commotion propelled the artists to show the works they were going to send to Paris in another exhibition in the same institution (MAM—Rio) called the Salão da Bússola [Compass Salon].

According to the art historian Francisco Bittencourt, the first Salão da Bússola exhibition was carefully managed by Mario Schenberg and Frederico Morais so as to avoid severe censorship on the part of the military. The salon also defined a new position among artists that enabled them to address the oppression affecting not only cultural life but also the urge to experience art as a linguistic, corporeal, conceptual practice.

Though Walmir Ayala, who was a representative of the International Association of Art Critics, opposed the unconventional aspects of some works—such as Barrio’s work: Situação....Orhhhh....ou 5.000....T.E......em.... N.Y...CITY.... (1969) and the work presented by Antonio Manuel: Soy Loco por Ti (1969)—Mario Schenberg (a representative of MAM–SP) defended the latter work and its award. Schenberg deemed Antonio Manuel’s piece as prize worthy because it was no longer confined within the dilemmas of geometric abstraction and the painting tradition of the beaux arts. He also defended the experimental works of the artists as practices that denounced the conservative authoritarian forces in politics and the market.

This exhibition marked a transition between the 1960s and 1970s. The artists were imbued with a more politicized and irreverent approach in their practices. Their artworks were seen as politically charged—even if, at first glance, some of their work seemed more experimental than political. In all cases, the artworks were constructed under the premise that an


innovative artistic language was necessary to address social and cultural issues that were being repressed.  

The more experimental language on exhibit at the Salão da Bússola was possible due to the private funding and organization of the exhibition. The existence of the Unidade Experimental [Experimental Unit] at MAM, a series of regular experimental art classes and public debates about art, that were organized and administered by Cildo Meireles, Luis Alphonsus, and Guilherme Vaz, also promoted bold language.

In the classes, participants planned to work with tactile, audible, and olfactory materials through interdisciplinary projects that approached art as a communicative, informational act. They were rethinking the mediums of art and expanding its boundaries in order to embrace the challenges in the era of mechanical reproduction. Their interests were vast and led to debates about the sciences and theories of communication, and included works involving sounds, photography and performances, without necessarily creating art objects.

This enterprise—the invention of a contemporary poetics—encouraged Meireles to add some levity to his salon application. The application listed several mediums: “painting, sculpture, engraving, etc.” Meireles entered two of his work from 1969—Arte Física: Caixas de Brasília/Clareira [Physical Art: Brasília Boxes/Clearing] and Arte Física: 30 km de Linha

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140 Bittencourt, “Dez anos de experimentação,” 175.
142 The three artists knew each other in the youth, where they participated in the same classes in the studio of the Peruvian artist Felix Alejandro Barrenechea Avilez in Brasília.
Meireles could not have entered *Physical Art: Brasília Boxes/Clearing* under any traditional category because the work is a combination of three different elements: photographs, objects, and a map. It presents a photographic documentation of an action made by Meireles and his friends on the Paranoá Lake margin in Brasília, the recently inaugurated capital of Brazil. His work also presents two cardboard cubes and a map indicating where the action took place.

The pictures depict the landscape of the region, a sunset over the lake, some *cerrado*\(^{144}\) trees, a campfire at night, and a hole in the ground. There were images featuring Meireles, Alfredo Fontes, and Guilherme Vaz cleaning and cordoning off the terrain with ropes and constructing three boxes\(^ {145}\) (Figure 24). The boxes were filled with materials the artists used in the performance of occupation—stakes, ropes, earth, coal, and ashes. The two cubes on display in the gallery were brown, sealed boxes. The spectator can only realize what the contents of the boxes are by associating them with the nearby pictures. The third element is a city map (Figure 25). Meireles handwrote an inscription that points to the location where one could find the vestiges of the artists’ actions and where a third box was buried. The work is replete with sub-narratives (or parallel narratives) related to the story of its making that are not visible in the gallery space.

\(^{144}\) *Cerrado* is the name of the ecosystem in the central–western part of Brazil, where Brasília was constructed.

\(^{145}\) Oliveira, Cildo Meireles, interview with the author. According to Meireles, the same ropes were used in another project in the series *Physical Art*, which was *Ropes/30km of Extended Line.*
In one of these stories, which emerged in one of Meireles’s interviews,146 he explains that he tried to do the work a few times before he succeeded. The first time he tried, he chose a spot closer to the center of Brasília. Right after he created the campfire, the police arrived and expelled his party from the site. The second time he tried, the same thing happened: the police arrived and forbade their presence in the area. Then it occurred to Meireles that they were being watched; he realized that the TV tower was being used by the military to monitor the city. Thus, they decided to head to a very distant locale that would take the military police a long time to reach. Once there, they made their campfire. But hours later, the police arrived and sought to remove them from the premises. Finding the situation suspicious, however, the police tried to confiscate the boxes. Ultimately, though, the artists were permitted to leave with their boxes.

The Brazilian sociologist Angélica Madeira points to Brasília as a site of pervasive surveillance and great military power. There, the discrepancies between the official art—the art championed by the military in the newly inaugurated museum and city capital (that is, concretism)—and the marginal art produced by young, unknown artists were massive. Within this atmosphere of military occupation (and given the consequent destruction of the dream of Brasília as the heart of the projects designed to create “the synthesis of the arts”147), Meireles, Vaz, and Fontes enacted their artistic occupation. In a double move consisting of criticism and territorial occupation, the artists realized a conceptualist practice. And their practice resonated


147 Mário Pedrosa, one of the most active art critics in Brazil in the 1950s and 60s, was engaged in the first important cultural meetings and exhibitions of the New Capital. Pedrosa chose “Brasília Synthesis of the Arts” as the title for the Congress of International Association of Art Critics in Brasília, 1959. He believed in “Brasília’s perspective”—a view that would unify the different parts of Brazil and influence the works of those who lived there.
with the urge to bury old references in language—the ashes of what they cleaned and appropriated—and to act upon the death and incarceration of people, values, and freedom.

The occupation also delineated the parameters for the artistic practice, inside of which documentation and imaginative process could coexist. As the literary critic Silviano Santiago explains, the combination (in literature and the arts) of facts and fiction became very popular in Brazil in the seventies because the journalistic narratives were necessarily diminished due to the rampant censorship in the country.\footnote{Silviano Santiago, \textit{The Space in Between: Essays on Latin American Culture}, ed. Ana Lúcia Gazzola (North Carolina: Duke University Press, 2001).}

Interestingly, whereas Brasília Boxes/Clearing possessed significant cultural specificity, the Physical Art series referenced symbolic spatial occupation as well as real occupation. Taken together, one might reasonably assume that Meireles was concerned about power relations between geopolitical regions (which had been emphasized by many artists of the time). Clearly, notions of space, place, and boundaries were motivating cultural production.

Meireles won first prize for these works, which included a trip to New York City and an opportunity to exhibit overseas. The irreverent act of categorizing his artworks as \textit{etc.} seized the attention of the jury and the public. It was also at this exhibition that Kynaston McShine, the MoMA curator who would soon organize \textit{INFORMATION}, was first introduced to the works of Artur Barrio, Cildo Meireles, and Guillerme Vaz.

During his stay in Brazil, McShine witnessed artists struggling to eschew and overcome the institutional bureaucracy and its ties with conservative forces. Of the twenty works displayed in the exhibition, seven were categorized as \textit{etc.} This appropriation of the hidden and infinite
meanings contained in the word etc. elicited a biased reaction on the part of the salon jury and earned the salon a nickname: the salon of etc.\textsuperscript{149}

In his essay for the INFORMATION catalogue, McShine wrote that artists were creating art aimed at reaching a broader audience capable of engaging with the cultural, political, and social issues inherent in their work. In addition, the overflow of media images led the artists to produce art in new environments, outside the museum and gallery spaces. Thus, \textit{Physical Art} seemed to resonate with the art that McShine thought would be fitting for the show\textsuperscript{150} (Figure 22).

In the two other objects/actions of the \textit{Physical Art} series—and also in the conceptualization of the sculpture classes where Meireles was implemented as the “director” of the Experimental Unit at MAM–Rio—Meireles embraced some artistic practices that resembled those of Robert Smithson. This similarity was most pronounced in Smithson’s works such as \textit{Non-Site (Palisades, Edgewater, NJ)} and \textit{Non-Site (Franklin, NJ)}, both created in 1968 (Figure 26). Smithson’s work consisted of a bin of rocks, a map, and a typed description of the place where the rocks originated. In this work, the image and word pairing referenced a place outside of the gallery. It required the audience to imagine a place that was not really knowable, a place


\textsuperscript{150} Kynaston McShine, ed., INFORMATION. (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1970), 139. McShine asserted the following in his essay: “The activity of these artists is to think of concepts that are broader and more cerebral than the expected ‘product of the studio.’ With the sense of mobility and change that pervades their time, they are interested in ways of rapidly exchanging ideas, rather than embalming the idea in an ‘object.’ However, the idea may reside on paper or film. The public is constantly bombarded with strong visual imagery, be it in the newspapers or periodicals, on television or the cinema. An artist certainly cannot compete with a man on the moon in the living room. This has therefore created an ambiguous and ironic position for the artist, a dilemma as to what he can do with contemporary media that reach many more people than the art gallery. In the reevaluation of their situation, some artists have attempted to extend themselves into their environment and to work with its problems and events.”
that could be accessed only via the material vestiges in the gallery. Sparking viewers’
imaginations, the fragments of land formed a realistic (though fictional) memory that coincided
with Smithson’s own vision of the actual places. He used maps, photographs, films, drawings,
and notes as part of his post-studio artistic process. Art historian Caroline A. Jones sees
Smithson’s operations beyond the studio as mingling multiple mediums in a complex poetics.
The recording of the collective expeditions to his sites, his writings, and his Non-Site exhibitions
contributed to what she calls a postmodernist artistic practice.\textsuperscript{151}

According to Marco Antonio Pasqualini de Andrade, the work at the Experimental Unit is
an extension of Meireles’s Physical Art series, one of his post-studio operations.\textsuperscript{152} Using this
parallel between Meireles and Smithson, I want to stress the almost simultaneous creation of
their projects and to highlight a possible motive for McShine’s interest in Meireles’s work for
INFORMATION. McShine may have sought Meireles’s work because of its close resemblance
to Smithson’s. The similarity might have allowed McShine to frame Meireles’s project in the
context of earthwork documentation and the theory developed by Smithson in his 1968 text, “A
Provisional Theory of Non-Sites.” Also, Meireles’s art would align with the critical aspects of
what later became known as institutional critique, a practice that questioned the rules of the
institution. Indeed, the very act of placing his work within the \textit{etc.} category provided evidence

\textsuperscript{151} Mário Pedrosa, “Arte Ambiental, Arte Pós-Moderna, Hélio Oiticica” (1966), reprinted in
Ferreira, \textit{Crítica de Arte no Brasil}, 143. In the other hemisphere—years before Caroline A. Jones wrote
about Smithson—the art critic Mário Pedrosa discussed the new parameters of art-making and the
situational and perceptive structures that had become pivotal to art. To Pedrosa, Brazilian avant-garde art
was comparable to the art produced overseas and a part of the “new phase in the art situation, of anti-art,
of ‘post-modern art.’”

\textsuperscript{152} Andrade maintains that though tropicalism was influenced by the Merleau-Ponty
phenomenology of perception, Meireles’s works were closer to the philosophical investigations of Gaston
Bachelard in his book, \textit{Poetics of Space}. Meireles generated a poetics in which the reveries and myths of
his youth are equally assimilated in his practice.
that his work bore more than a passing resemblance to the art starting to be produced in the United States at the time.

Beyond the invitation letter sent by MoMA explaining the objectives of INFORMATION, McShine wrote a letter asking Meireles to send written material and a piece that could be easily incorporated into the exhibition. McShine suggested to Meireles that he should send Arte Física: Caixas de Brasília/Clareira [Physical Art: Brasília Boxes/Clearing]. However, surprisingly, Meireles decided not to send the work. His decision to send a smaller, more portable work was propelled by two reasons. The first (and very pragmatic) reason for his choice was that an American postal strike was delaying all correspondence between the artists in Brazil and MoMA. Therefore, Meireles opted for the safer option: to have Hélio Oiticica, who was already traveling to New York to participate in the exhibition, to bring both of their works to the United States.

The second reason was that Meireles wanted to maintain the site-specificity of his work. Moreover, his dialogue with the curator affected the type of project he wanted to create for the show. Essentially, thinking about the institution that invited him—including the curatorial proposition (a letter explaining the exhibition’s purpose to the artists)—was crucial to Meireles.

The Coca-Cola Project and the Banknote Project surfaced in part as a consequence of the impasse that an invitation to exhibit overseas produced in Meireles. In other words, because Meireles occupied a marginalized position inside the art circuits of other countries and his own country (concrete art was championed in the official spheres: palaces, plazas, and buildings in Brasília), such an invitation would necessarily influence his thinking and practice.

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153 McShine’s letter is at Cildo Meireles’s studio archives. Image of the letter is in the appendix.
It is important to note, however, that Meireles’s marginal status does not imply that his work is inferior or less relevant than other mainstream projects. Conversely, his art derives potency from his experimental practice in relation to art itself. His willingness to confront the norm—not only in terms of the political and institutional powers at the time, but also in terms of the military and capitalistic forces at play—lends a certain weight to his work. And indeed, Meireles embraced the marginality thrust upon him by branding himself an outsider as well.

The idea of provincialism inside the artistic circuit functions as a subtle form of censorship at times. This censorship can permeate the operations of the institutional and market circuits (and their agents, who fight to keep their dominant position in the field and in the minds of those not in a dominant position). In an upcoming chapter, *The Problem of Provincialism*, this study addresses this challenge in the context of the exhibition catalogue. First, however, I shall investigate the exhibition.

**INFORMATION**

In 1970, the Museum of Modern Art in New York presented a provocatively titled show: INFORMATION. This exhibition is considered a milestone in the history of twentieth-century art, one of the first attempts to historicize the art of the emergent information age.¹⁵⁴ Kynaston McShine, an American curator, invited a group of one hundred artists from around the world to

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participate in this exhibition. He asked them to reflect upon the moment in history when the speed of information and the interconnectivity of the various parts of the globe brought the world’s disparities to human consciousness. The exhibition hinged on the paradox that though television, radio, air mail, the telephone, and the printing press connected people and instilled a belief in humankind’s scientific and technological progress, those same devices brought with them the knowledge of the political and economic unfeasibility of a worldwide social modernization. Those groundbreaking technologies, in short, shone a spotlight on the intrinsic belief that was bound up in their very nature: homogenized social and scientific universal progress may be a worthy, though distant, goal.

In her article, “The Dream of the Information World,” Eve Meltzer argues that INFORMATION can be understood within the framework of structuralism, which was rising in the academic field as an approach to the study of language involving different disciplines and authors. Some such theorists who contributed to structuralism include Claude Levi Strauss in anthropology, Jacques Lacan in psychoanalysis and Jean Piaget in education. For Meltzer, the lesson of structuralism is that domination is an aspect of the human experience present in the all-pervasive constraints of language and structural thought. This domination, she contends, provides a basis for all knowledge production and the structural, unconscious processes of subjectivity. Thus, she asserts that artists included in INFORMATION were witnessing and acting out with that prerogative. They were not simply illustrating the information era; they were acknowledging the dominance of language as part of the structure of any society.

156 Ibid.
Meltzer discusses some of the works of Sol LeWitt, for instance, as variations based on the transformation of a system. And she argues that such a transformation is possible due to the law governing elements, which are an inherent property of a given structure. She claims that the obsession of LeWitt and other artists with the way information looked grew out of the fact that information is not a self-evident concept. In addition, the very concept of information invaded each artist’s imagination and practice, which caused them to seek out ways to visualize it. The main point of Meltzer’s argument is that the conceptualization of the artwork and the power structure present in the world are entangled. According to Meltzer:

Thus ‘information’ at this exhibition brought together on the one hand the Conceptualist notion of art as ‘infrastructural analysis’, and on the other, forms and fantasies derived from communication technologies. But that was not all. The word also represented, third and finally, matters of global political urgency. If there was a crisis of world proportions, then this exhibition made clear that it had to do not simply with the US invasion of Cambodia or the killing of the Kent State student protesters by the National Guard. Rather, artists contended with the idea that they and their work might be complicit. ‘Information’ was, therefore, also about artists and activism. The very notion was embraced by artists and activists in search of new signifying means and revolutionary avenues of information.¹⁵⁷

At that point, information was seen as an inescapable structuring of reality that should be addressed conceptually in its ideological terms. This perspective is even evident when one considers the curator’s intentions behind the show. In the exhibition prospectus, McShine encouraged artists to make work outside of traditional categories (such as painting, sculpture, printing, and drawing). Further, he asserted that conceptual art was the most important trend in art after pop art and minimalism. It must, however, be noted that the parameters of conceptual art were hotly contested. Many of the artists that participated in INFORMATION were classified

¹⁵⁷ Ibid., 126.
as conceptual artists despite their resistance to categories such as conceptual art, systems art, and literal art.

**Meireles in INFORMATION: Coca-Cola Project and Banknote Project**

The objects Meireles presented in INFORMATION engendered a complex system. This is significant because the fact that they appeared to be simple objects aligns them with a modernist tradition in which the work of art is an autonomous object. But nevertheless, they do not fit into the traditional categories of art (such as painting, sculpture, or drawing). The objects are readymades, which is in itself a complicating factor for the conceptualization of Meireles’s projects. Via its reliance on the readymade, the projects that Meireles presented at INFORMATION had several possible theoretical interpretations. As mentioned earlier, though most interpretations consider the insertion of an object into the social fabric as the most important facet of Meireles’s work, this dissertation argues that it should be read as an open and complex system in which all interpretations can be valid at different times and as the instructions are activated. The description of Meireles’s contribution to INFORMATION appears on the checklist at MoMA’s registrar department as “Untitled. 2 Coke bottles, 2 bill notes.”

158 This indicates that the works were exhibited for the first time without a title—and what later came to be called *Coca-Cola Project* was displayed with two bottles of Coca-Cola instead of the three

158 Quoted from a checklist provided by Jennifer Schauer—department coordinator of the collection management and exhibition registration at the Museum of Modern Art. See also: Gregory Battock quoted by Meltzer, “The Dream of Information World,” 121. Battock complained about the exhibition: “Imagine 1. an art exhibition that started out by inviting artists’ contribution without anybody having seen the works first; 2. an exhibition with a catalog that will illustrate over 100 works—many of which will not be included in the show; 3. a catalog that lists artists that aren’t represented in the show at all; 3. an exhibition that includes works that are not included...”
featured in subsequent photographs. In the MoMA collection, the existing photographs of the exhibition’s installation do not show the objects in detail (Figure 27 and Figure 28).

In addition to the logistical complications of exhibiting abroad—having the works sent by a third party and not assisting in the installation of the objects—it seems that Meireles’s projects became almost invisible in terms of the transparency of the actual Coca-Cola bottles. Perhaps, Meireles was repeating his earlier strategy of clearing a territory he wanted to occupy. The white letters on translucent material demanded considerable effort on the audience’s end. The transparency was referencing and emptying out pop imagery. The two bottles in the display were a form of noise that accompanied what had been previously communicated about the Coca-Cola in the art world. Better yet, the bottles represented a suspension of meaning because the lack of observable elements made the message incomprehensible. The banknotes might have aided the audience’s understanding of Meireles’s instructions (because they could be read on the colorful background); yet because they were written in Portuguese and not in English they were susceptible to miscommunication, misdirection, and illegibility.

In retrospect, in a 2007 interview with Felipe Scovino, Meireles compares the Insertions with Orson Wells’s The War of the Worlds (1938), a radio novel that chronicled a Martian invasion live for listeners in the United States, some of whom did not realize it was fiction. Meireles made the comparison because he believes the Insertions to be objects situated in

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159 Scovino, Cildo Meireles, 160. Meireles affirms that, for his generation, in the 1970s, pop art was a hegemonic trend they were trying to avoid.

160 Ibid., 190. In 2002, Cristina Tejo asked Meireles what he thought about the visibility of Brazilian art. Meireles stated, “The visibility that is linked to the art depends upon economical conditions that are pegged to the system that encompasses galleries, collectors, magazines, buyers, theoreticians, critics, essayists. Only an improvement in the economical conditions could make the artistic scenario better.”

161 Scovino, Cildo Meireles, 247.
the threshold between reality and fiction. Meireles’s objects announced something that could have happened—the massive invasion of the industrial and artistic circuits by the surreptitious, “alien,” and incomprehensible messages in a foreign language. Of course, that artistic invasion existed more in the realm of imagination than in any territorial domain. In his work, the artist tries to demonstrate the potential for agitation and upheaval in large-scale circuits. This potential offers another similarity between Meireles’s work and Wells’s performance: both elicited significant repercussions in terms of the audience’s immediate response, although none of the projects received massive response. It’s worth noting that it is not only through mass-communication systems that the public can be manipulated; the industrial and cultural circuits are comparably fragile and open to subversion.

Later, and because Insertions allows it, Meireles symbolically reoccupied the space of INFORMATION. In 1973, art historians and critics in Brazil were interested in cataloguing Meireles’s participation in the exhibition. He asked MoMA’s staff for a picture of his work. After receiving a negative answer, he declared that he would make his own version of the object. This fact configures the series within a discursive system that can be implemented in

162 Ibid., 247.

163 In Meireles’s case, the Insertions series will receive its first feedback in Brazil, where the Coca-Cola bottles were displayed in a way that one could read the instructions. The exhibition in Brazil and its repercussion are addressed in the next section.

164 Oliveira, Cildo Meireles, interview with the author. This is interesting because it is both similar and dissimilar to what happened with Duchamp’s Fountain (which was discussed in the second chapter). At the time, critics who only had access to the picture of Fountain (they couldn’t see the object itself) fiercely debated the piece. The reason critics had to employ such an indirect approach was because the object disappeared after being rejected at the Salon of the Independents in 1917. The strange disappearance of Fountain opens up the possibility that Duchamp duplicated the object. The missing Coca-Cola Project image at MoMA gave Meireles the opportunity to create some noise in the system, inscribe new messages on the bottles, and create new ways of displaying his work. For Meireles, the absence of the picture at MoMA and the new photographic version of the series engendered the idea that the objects were still in circulation.
the history of art. In effect, Meireles reinvents history and feeds the system of art conflicting information by providing an anachronistic evidence for the series. In this sense, the new work can be viewed as a form of feedback, or a new version of the work created in response to both the instructions on the bottles and banknotes. Thus, the object can be perceived as noise or feedback to the system of art from inside the system of art. Meireles’s new image of the Coca-Cola Project was published in the first issue of the Brazilian art magazine Malasartes in 1975 (Figure 43) and later in a Mexican magazine, Artes Visuales, in 1978 (Figure 50).

In 1981, the first book containing Meireles’s artwork was published in Brazil. The cover features another photograph of the Insertions into Ideological Circuits: Coca-Cola Project that eventually became the best known image from the series as more publications featured it. The picture was taken by Pedro Oswaldo Cruz around 1980. Because it is the image art historians and critics reference for their analyses, it is discussed in this dissertation as well.

**Coca-Cola: A Democratic or an Imperialist Symbol?**

In 1988, in the *Latin American Spirit: Art and Artists in the United States, 1920–1970* exhibition catalogue, Meireles described his motivations behind creating Insertions into Ideological Circuits:

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166 Oliveira, Cildo Meireles, interview with the author. Meireles mentioned the importance of this show in terms of reviving his career in the international art world.
The scenario for this text and the projects is this momentous period (the late 1960s and early 1970s) in the cultural synthesis of Western culture’s history, which impelled a Brazilian artist in his early twenties to produce work that considered the following issues:

1. The painful political, social, and economic reality of Brazil—a consequence to a large extent of:
   2. The American system of politics and culture and its expansionist, interventionist, hegemonic, centralizing ideology—without losing sight of:
   3. The formal aspect of language.\(^{167}\)

Meireles had a very anticapitalist formation. His choice to appropriate Coca-Cola bottles represents a commentary on U.S. intervention policies. In Brazil, left-wing intellectuals, including Meireles, had to create strategies to avoid being associated with the petite bourgeoisie and the imperialist forces after the military coup of 1964. This need to dissociate became greater after 1968, when students, intellectuals, priests, and artists were subjected to repressive acts. In that year critic Roberto Schwarz wrote:

Brazilian intellectuals are left-wing, but the materials they prepare for government commissions and for the representatives of capital on the one hand, and for national newspapers and radio and television stations on the other, are not. The only truly radical material produced by this group is for its own consumption – which is in itself a substantial market. This situation became crystallized in 1964, when, in general, socialist intellectuals were spared the imprisonment, unemployment and exile they had been expecting.\(^ {168}\)

According to Schwarz, the Communist Party in Brazil sought to ally itself with the petite bourgeoisie and the political populist power in Brazil before the coup. As a result, Marxism


\(^{168}\) Roberto Schwarz, “Culture and Politics in Brazil, 1964–1969,” in *Misplaced Ideas: Essays on Brazilian Culture* (London/New York: Verso, 1992), 127. Professor of critic literature, Roberto Schwarz, wrote the article in 1969 and 1970. Though his article lacks factual precision, it indicates the perspective of the left in regards to the political cultural scenario in which Cildo Meireles produced his first works. Translation provided in the book.
struggled to take hold in Brazilian territory. During João Goulart’s administration, the Communist Party fought “against the foreign capital, foreign policy and agrarian reform.”

Meanwhile, the Brazilian population developed an anticapitalist and anti-imperialist sentiment. The 1964 coup instilled in the heart of the petite bourgeoisie the desire to modernize the country via agrarian and educational reforms. After the coup, the military quickly implemented a technocratic program of modernization that protected the ruling class from the threat of a spreading Communism.

American intervention started with an exclusive arms agreement with certain countries in Central America and South America. The United States sought to establish extreme right-wing governments in Latin America to facilitate its commercial expansion aspirations and its geopolitical strategies during the Cold War. These strategies were debated in the media and often associated with international expansion of corporations such as The Coca-Cola Company, which became the symbol of the American way of life—and subsequently, fodder for artists.

Amongst the MoMA archives related to INFORMATION, is Craig Gilborn’s article, “For Pedagogy: Looking at the Coke Bottle.” In the article, he contends that the Coca-Cola bottle is one of the great symbols of the American commercial and cultural expansionist project around the world:

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169 Ibid., 129.
170 In the archives, one can find materials that were accessed prior to the exhibition opening: articles by Herbert Marcuse and Marshall McLuhan, correspondences between MoMA staff and artists, press releases, artwork photographs, and a few newspaper articles. The material is organized by region and other categories that account for the complexity of the material.
171 INFORMATION Exhibition Research, III.14. The Museum of Modern Art Archives, New York. The author was an associate of the education division at the Winterthur Museum in Delaware and published the article in Museum News, December 7, 1968. Although the article is not addressing the art world, it was compiled among the articles researched by Kynaston McShine for INFORMATION.
The Coke bottle is probably the most widely recognized commercial product in the world. Only one person out of 400 was unable to identify a picture of the bottle in a product recognition study undertaken for a pen manufacturer in 1949. The bottle is one of the few truly participatory objects in the United States and in much of the rest of the world. Presidents drink Coca-Cola, and so do sharecroppers; usage cuts across nationalities, social and occupational classes, age groups, and sexes. The bottle, unlike most other objects which might be regarded as symbols par excellence of American culture, is singularly free of anxiety-producing associations. It is regarded with affection by generations of Americans brought up in gasoline stations, boot camps, and drug stores, and it has been known to evoke pangs of nostalgia when Americans gather in the cafes of Europe and Asia.172

Gilborn suggests that his readers “compare the changing historic roles of the Christian cross, the American flag, and the Coca-Cola sign in the non-Western nations of the world.”173 This suggestion clarifies the pervasiveness of the Coca-Cola bottle as a symbol for the American way of life. It also helps explain Meireles’s choice to employ this particular object in order to direct his anti-imperialist message at the United States.

If it is taken as a sign, a Coca-Cola bottle camouflages the economic domain of its production through its inoffensive, nonideological appearance.174 Meireles effectively

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173 Ibid.

174 Silviano Santiago, The Space in Between, 120. Silviano Santiago recalled his youth in a small city in Brazil. He was deprived of all foreign references (such as books and magazines), and he was only exposed to American cinema. He asserts that “It was, therefore, to be expected that the divided mind of the child and the youth would serve as a readymade dish for obdurate nationalists like Monteiro Lobato, or city-bred intellectuals cross-dressed as ethnographers, like Mario de Andrade (1893–1945), or novelists cross-dressed as authors of children’s books. It was the consensus among writers that the field of the traditional and authentic repertory of popular Brazilian stories was being mined, taken by assault and dominated by the culture of the American industrialized image, and it did not matter to them if at the time the nation to the north was our political ally in the fight against the Axis powers. Strategically, the Americans had chosen a perfect target to achieve the change in the habits of entertainment and leisure: the children and youths (at the time known as “Coca-Cola boys”). With the imaginary taken over from the tenderest age by the industrially produced image, we would all be easy prey for all time.” Translation provided in the book.
problematized these friendly and easily accessible facets of the bottle when he transformed it into an informational counterattack on the system that produced it.

Although there was a slight chance that Meireles’s work would create some kind of global awareness about the invasion of a foreign product, he realized that the awareness would likely remain localized. There was neither a guarantee of a boycott against Coca-Cola, nor an assurance that the imperialist forces at play would be reconfigured. Quite the contrary, the participatory effect suggested by Meireles might coincide with the aspirations of Coca-Cola’s marketing team to increase profits. The company could easily create and control the techniques of the message production (by offering free silkscreen kits or holding a contest to choose the best message for large-scale production, for instance) and thus negate any subversive action.

Even though one could consider the Coca-Cola bottle a symbol of democratic consumption, it is not a symbol of democratic production as long as the company focuses its energy on using the product to increase profit. Meireles’s project serves as a means of uncovering this reality and converting the democratic consumption of consumer goods into a democratic production of critical information.

The Coca-Cola Project and the Banknote Project as Guerilla Tactics

The idea of the artistic guerilla was championed by Décio Pignatari, concrete poet and theorist of communication in his 1967 article, “Teoria da Guerrilha Artística” [Theory of Artistic Guerilla].175 Likewise, Frederico Morais’s article, “Contra a Arte afluente: O Corpo é o Motor da Obra” [Against a Rising Art: The Body is the Motor of Art], advocates the subject in the late

1960s. This idea resonated with the Brazilian mind-set at the time, and it is a widespread idea in the accounts of early Latin American revisionists in the United States, as noted in the introduction of this dissertation.

In the specific case of the *Insertions* series, the open-endedness of the series juxtaposed the moment of its first appearance with future versions of the series. The future versions of *Insertions into Ideological Circuits* were assembled in Brazil when abusive military power was rampant. The military coup d’état took place in 1964, and under the command of General Castello Branco, the country saw the dissolution of political parties, the dismantlement of political representatives, and the termination of political and civil rights. By 1968, General Artur Costa e Silva and his regime promulgated Institutional Act Number Five (which suspended activities of Congress, eliminated the right of habeas corpus, and instituted stronger censorship in all media communication). Thus, the government retaliations against protesting civilians were present since the beginning of Meireles’s career. The *Coca-Cola Project* and the first *Banknote Project*, however, embody slightly different approaches to this context in their various versions. Despite the usual assumptions about the work frequently interpreted as guerrilla intervention, I want to argue that it operates as a conceptual work that refers to systems, a general instruction with multiple realizations.

In the few bottles of Coca-Cola circulating in Brazil after 1973—and in those the artist displayed in art exhibitions—one silkscreened message gained a high degree of notoriety in the art world: “Yankees Go Home!” The title was addressed to an actual and symbolic audience—the people viewing the artworks and the imperialist power of American corporations. This was

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the message selected for INFORMATION, and it is the title that invariably appears in the catalogues and articles about the series.

Meireles crafted two different titles for the bottles while in Brazil: “Which is the place of art?” [sic]; and “Molotov, Pavio, Fita Adesiva, Gasolina” [Molotov, Wick, Tape, Gasoline]. Some authors believe he imprinted even more, but there are no vestiges of those bottles. The precise dates of the other messages on the bottles are unknown, but they were likely made after 1973, since Meireles lived abroad from 1971 to 1973. During those two years, he did not participate in exhibitions or create any objects besides of his Token project in New York, which will be further discussed in the fifth chapter.

Beneath each of these titles, each Coca-Cola bottle contains an instruction which is always the same when they appear, regardless of where the object is displayed. The instruction appears as follows: “to register information and critical opinions on bottles and return them to circulation.” This statement could be read as a self-referential record of the artist’s action, or read as a set of instructions intended for a broader audience of consumers and civilians. If the latter is true, Meireles seems to be urging the public to use the circulation system of commerce as an unpredictable and subversive medium. These instructions were also present in the Banknote Project in its first version (and in later iterations, when different titles were used).

The use of imperative language in the “Yankees Go Home!” message reinforces the idea that consumers are often exposed to command words in advertisements and politics alike. In the context of Brazil’s military situation, these words become more relevant. Oppression was instituted and censorship advanced to a significant degree in all of the country’s cultural
production. To combat this tyranny, Meireles’s aggressive message functioned as a viable alternative (or as some authors claim, a guerilla tactic).

“Molotov, Wick, Tape, Gasoline,” though, is the closest that Meireles got to effecting guerrilla tactics within the *Insertions* series. This work features a drawing of a Coca-Cola bottle placed into a real Coca-Cola bottle. It is constructed as a *mis en abyme* image, suggesting the potential for infinite appropriation. The drawing is a didactic diagram that depicts all the elements necessary to create a homemade bomb. Thus, the work appropriates an ordinary object and repurposes it as a potential weapon. If these violent possibilities were not part of Meireles’s initial plan, they were later (after the regime became more repressive and Meireles sought to answer the critique aimed at the *Coca-Cola Project*).

The problem with reading the *Coca-Cola Project* and the first *Banknote Project* as the product of guerrilla tactics is that the objects were viewed primarily in light of the military conflict in Brazil, where censorship was explicit. This account was the most debated, and many art historians found it the most plausible because they thought that Meireles was creating the objects to circulate exclusively within Brazil. To the contrary, however, Meireles first created the objects for exhibition in America. In the United States, his guerilla tactics entailed creating a work to provoke an American audience artistically and politically, and, in doing so, he presented objects that reflected the artistic trends at the time and engendered awareness about the United States’ support of Latin American dictatorships.

To some extent, censorship also existed in American territory. However, censorship in the United States was light—it involved a tacit agreement made by art critics and the media to avoid controversial issues. Unfortunately, this strategy makes undesirable facts become invisible.
It is also important to recall another reason for the invisibility of the work in the exhibition. The first versions of the *Coca-Cola Project* and the *Banknote Project* were made hurriedly to make an exhibition deadline in New York (the American post office strike delayed the application process). When asked about his decision to write the instructions in Portuguese, Meireles notes that he did not have time to translate the instructions from Portuguese to English. At MoMA Archives in New York, pictures of Meireles’s installation were not taken as close-ups. Still, one can see that the two bottles were empty.

Meireles asserts in an interview that he chose his most famous slogan—“Yankees Go Home!”—because it was anti-imperialist jargon heard around the world. He figured it would make more sense to use the word *Yankees* within the United States because the more common Brazilian word, *gringos*, would be less comprehensible. In other words, if art historians interpreted the message in the proper frame (that is, given Meireles’s conceptualization of *Insertions into Ideological Circuits* for INFORMATION), they might infer that Meireles was adding to the debates surrounding anti-imperialism, antiwar rhetoric vis-à-vis Vietnam, and Native American rights. Instead, the meaning was reduced mostly to the framework of art made in Brazil during the 1970s, not the global context, including the American museum where it was first exhibited. Yet, we might also understand this shift in emphasis as a kind of feedback specific to the work.

In this sense, the misinterpretation on the part of art historians reinforces my argument that Meireles’s *Insertions* series coincides with and expands upon the logic of the late capitalist system and should be read as a system itself. It should change the interpretative framework that

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177 Oliveira, Cildo Meireles, interview with the author.
accompanied the series in different times and contexts. After all, the series was recaptured—that is, used as a product—by the novel demands of the new markets in which his work was later framed: inside a postcolonial discourse. This idea is described by Terry Smith as one of the themes that informs what some call contemporary art. For him, the process of decolonization and its impact in central countries has “generated a plethora of art shaped by local, national, anticolonial, independent values (diversity, identity, critique).” Meireles’s production entails intertwining a postcolonial critique with the rejection of spectacle capitalism. But his series also develops within the art system because it uses the system as a medium. In other words, it is capable of accumulating the feedback generated by the series.

In sum, this chapter presented the circumstances in which the *Insertions into Ideological Circuits* were first displayed. In many ways, INFORMATION was the great stage perfect for the projects, despite their meaning might have been incomprehensible at the exhibition. The illegibility of the *Insertions* gave room for particular and dominant readings of the projects while exclusively circulating in Brazil. The next chapter turns attention to the successful and compelling readings of the projects by Frederico Morais and Antonio Manuel, who were the first art critic and artist, respectively, to produce feedback for the *Insertions into Ideological Circuits*.

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178 Smith, *What is Contemporary Art?*, 266.
CHAPTER 4—FEEDBACK

This chapter focuses on the second exhibition of the Coca-Cola Project in Rio de Janeiro which opened almost simultaneous to INFORMATION in New York. The importance of the Rio de Janeiro show rests in the way it demonstrated a kind of feedback. While in the United States, Meireles’s project remained invisible, in Brazil it incited compelling responses. In the last section of this chapter, I discuss how Meireles views others’ feedback to the Insertions series and the anxiety about the unpredictability of such responses. Because this dissertation focuses on the Insertions chronology, this chapter appears between my discussion of INFORMATION and my chapter discussing the INFORMATION catalogue. The Coca-Cola Project was launched in Brazil five days after it was first displayed at INFORMATION in the United States. The INFORMATION catalogue, however—understood here as an autonomous artwork—was created to last and it precipitated a discussion about provincialism that remained in the art world even after these exhibitions finished.

When and where Insertions took place and their current status

During January and March of 2011, I conducted several interviews with Meireles, who explained that he first silkscreened the text onto the Coca-Cola bottles with the specific objective of exhibiting at INFORMATION. Only subsequently did he replicate the procedure with other Coca-Cola bottles in Brazil. Despite the fact that that work had been assembled for the first INFORMATION (July 2nd through September 20th), the series was also exhibited in Brazil during the same period of time. The series appeared in an exhibition titled Agnus Dei at Petit

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179 See also Scovino, Cildo Meireles, 154.
Galerie in Rio de Janeiro (July 8th through July 17th). In other words, MoMA presented the objects six days before they were displayed at Petit Galerie. This simultaneous presentation has led to confusion in some catalogues and articles that claimed the series debuted in Brazil. This simple shift in the timeline could be seen as a shortsighted pursuit of the work’s origin myth and a reductive mode of art history writing. However, this dissertation argues that this shift emphasizes *Insertions into Ideological Circuits* as an artistic proposition that does more than elicit action among consumers of Coca-Cola and average citizens. In sum, the response of the public is not required for the object to be meaningful.

In the exhibition in Brazil, which lasted just one week, the *Coca-Cola Project* received its first feedback from someone other than Meireles. That exhibit represented a different version made by Meireles of the project presented at INFORMATION: two bottles, one full and one half-full. *Agnus Dei* was curated by Frederico Morais, who was a key figure in the art scene in Brazil. Morais was the program coordinator of the visual arts of the MAM in Rio de Janeiro from 1967 to 1973.\(^{180}\) He was a very active curator who experimented with new ways of generating criticism in his work. He invited Meireles for important exhibitions, and he championed Meireles’s experimental works in newspaper articles such as “A Década, no Brasil e no Mundo” [The Decade in Brazil and in the World] in Rio de Janeiro’s *Diário de Noticias*.\(^{181}\) Morais was

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also responsible for inspiring Meireles, Artur Barrio, Guilherme Vaz and other artists to embrace the notion of guerilla art.\(^\text{182}\)

Guerrilla art existed within a precarious infrastructure. It possessed an attitude of irreverence in regards to political and social issues, and it also redefined its models of legitimation inside the modernist canon. (Morais, Meireles, and other artists were reconsidering the notion of vanguard and its implications).\(^\text{183}\) Thus, Morais was acting as curator and art critic in a new way that closely linked him to the artists.

Morais organized Agnus Dei as a sequence of three one-week events, each week featuring a different artist.\(^\text{184}\) At the end of the three-week cycle, Morais created objects and critiques as counter-propositions to the artists who had exhibited. Morais showed the objects in a one-night closing event after three weeks, which he called A Nova Crítica\(^\text{185}\) [The New Critique]. As a response to Meireles’s work, Morais placed fifteen thousand bottles of Coca-Cola on the floor,


\(^\text{184}\) According to Marco Antonio Pasqualini de Andrade, the exhibition that took place from June 22 to July 17—organized by Frederico Morais—allowed each artist one week to show work. The first exhibit featured Thereza Simões’s Inscrições [Inscriptions], which consisted of white paintings paired with sentences related to them. The paintings referenced another work she created that involved protest sentences stamped on sidewalks. The following week, Guilherme Vaz showed documentation revealing that he was appropriating every visitor of the exhibition. Thus, he considered every visitor to be a part of his artwork. Finally, Cildo Meireles showed some previous works—including pictures of his work Tiradentes: Tótem-Monumento ao Preso Político and the Coca-Cola Project (shown for the first time in Brazil).

\(^\text{185}\) Morais’s title of the event referenced another of Meireles’s work that was in the exhibition Introdução Para Uma Nova Crítica (1970). In that exhibition, the artist cited Man Ray (Gift, 1929) and Hélio Oiticica (Nests, 1969) and created a chair with a seat full of nails pointing upward, surrounded with a black veil. Morais maintained a dialogue with Meireles, and the former referenced the title of Meireles’s work in his own objects for the exhibition. The image of Meireles’s work is provided in the appendix of this dissertation. See also: Glória Ferreira, ed. Anos 70: Arte como Questão/Art as Question the 1970s (São Paulo: Instituto Tomie Ohtake, 2009), 75; and Freitas, “Contra-Arte”.

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but only two in the middle of the room displayed messages (Figure 29). According to Morais, Meireles’s project had a scale problem. As a couple of individual bottles, the work would become lost when introduced to the industrial scale, and that would also be the case if only a couple of bottles with inscriptions were displayed on the gallery floor in the new exhibit. This was the first significant response to Coca-Cola Project.

Morais’s response is particularly relevant because there are no reports in newspapers from that period discussing public participation in the artistic proposition. Arguably, the only meaningful audience response came from an art critic, Frederico Morais. It was the “exhibition/comment,” as named by Francisco Bittencourt, made by Morais commenting on Meireles work, the first Insertions series feedback produced by the audience.

The installation of the fifteen thousand bottles on the gallery floor and walls is a striking image that reveals the power of art in its circuit and art’s weakness when it is transported as an object to other circles. The two bottles rest on an ordinary table that resembles a traditional pedestal where one might see a sculpture displayed. The contrast between the figure and the background highlights the position of the bottles, and this arrangement stresses the position of art

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186 Frederico Morais, Cronologia das Artes Plásticas no Rio de Janeiro: 1816–1994 (Rio de Janeiro: Topbooks, 1995), 312. In his description of the A Nova Crítica exhibition, Morais suggests an unfair disparity between the simple gesture of the artist and the outsized and corporate gesture of Coca-Cola manufacturers. Because Coca-Cola could lend the bottles without fear that such a gesture would change something in relation to the consumption of the drink and the fact that the company could fill the gallery with fifteen thousand bottles in one day and vacate the place the next day (at no cost to the gallery) demonstrates the speed and efficiency of mobilization and territorial occupation of Coca-Cola corporation.

187 Freitas, “Contra-Arte,” 65–102. Freitas presents a very interesting analysis of Meireles’s Insertions into Ideological Circuit: Coca-Cola Project participation at Agnus Dei. The author contends that Meireles is returning the object to the art world, even though, as mentioned previously, the object never participated in the industrial and social systems before being exhibited.

188 See Francisco Bittencourt, “Dez anos de experimentação” (1980), reprinted in Ferreira, Crítica de Arte no Brasil, 179.
when juxtaposed with mass production. In effect, Morais is using mass production to critique Meireles’s work. If Meireles’s work were invisible—that is, if the audience could interfere with each of the thousands of bottles—the only way to observe that interference would be to lift the newly engaged bottles away from the others. It is as if Morais is conveying the fact that the sample is more relevant than the real possibility to make the communication channel work. Art is a viable conduit because the powers of patronage are ubiquitous. The exhibition space not only consists of the ideologies intrinsic to the museums’ and galleries’ managers and founders; it is also built with invisible corporate support. After all, investments in art are a way for capitalist corporations to please the consumers of their products, and this reality is illustrated by the “kind”\textsuperscript{189} willingness of Coca-Cola’s managers to proffer their bottles for an art exhibition.

The photographs taken at the night exhibition make it clear that the audience could step on the bottles and walk around the gallery (Figure 30). The increased transparency of the glass in numerous places gives the impression that the floor may not be a completely secure place for walking. Further, the lucidity of the glass brings an immaterial dimension to the floor, and the rows of fragile bottles below give one the sense that the floor could collapse at anytime—symbolically and literally.\textsuperscript{190}

\textsuperscript{189} Frederico Morais’s own word in reference to his negotiation with Coca-Cola’s staff. Glória Ferreira, ed., Anos 70: Arte como Questão/Art as Question the 1970s (São Paulo: Instituto Tomie Ohtake, 2009) 75.

\textsuperscript{190} Oliveira, Frederico Morais, interview with the author. According to Frederico Morais, the exhibition had to be ended earlier than planned because there were rumors that the military police was willing to shut down and censor Morais’s work involving one of the canvases in Thereza Simões’s Inscrições [Inscriptions]. Morais took three blank canvases belonging to Simões and exhibited them in three different places in Rio de Janeiro. The first was placed at the train station, and it was stolen that same day; the second was destroyed; and the third was placed in the restroom of an upscale restaurant in Ipanema. The latter was covered with defamatory phrases directed at the president and the regime, and it was exhibited at A Nova Crítica. There is a photocopy of this work in the appendix of this dissertation.
“This is it was the slogan of Coca-Cola in Brazil during the 1970s,” and the title of the second known response to Meireles’s work (Figure 31). Isso É Que É [This Is It] (1975) was inspired by a photograph of four important figures on the exhibition night. The photograph was used by Antonio Manuel as part of a photomontage in a newspaper flan. The picture portrayed Morais; Mário Pedrosa, a critic; and two artists: Dionísio Del Santo and Antonio Manuel (the latter of whom is urinating in a Coca-Cola bottle) (Figure 32). In the final image, which belongs to the private collection of Morais, the figures appear in relief and are flanked by two bottles of Coca-Cola, a title, and some text explaining the event and Morais’s critique of Meireles’s show. Antonio Manuel wrote the following message on the image:

This is it: its manufacturer in blue reminds one of coca-cola by Décio Pignatari and the sense of open circle that was made around the multi cola. Cildo Meireles, “Insertions into Ideological Circuits,” to register critical opinions on bottles and return them to circulation. “For a new critique” Frederico Morais used non-verbal language and filled the gallery with medium-sized Coca-Cola bottles. Mário Pedrosa proposed to me to refill the coca-cola bottles with piss and return them to consumption. A circle of critique and repacking insertion. P.S. This is it, beyond its obvious implications; it is dedicated to masturbating ladies who end up in hospital, with coca-cola bottles stuck in them due to vacuum. Antonio Manuel, October 1975.

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191 Thaís de Souza Rivitti, “A Ideia de Circulação na Obra de Cildo Meireles” (Master’s thesis, Universidade de São Paulo, 2007) 41. Rivitti asserts that Meireles’s sentence strategically aligns itself more closely with pop aesthetics than with the uses of language in conceptual art. The sentence, “Yankees Go Home!” is short and easy to remember, just like the Coca-Cola slogan: “This is it.”

192 In the catalogue, Anos 70: Arte como Questão /Art as Question the 1970s. (São Paulo: Instituto Tomie Ohtake, 2009), 75, the image is dated 1970. However, the image notes that it was made in 1975. It is likely that the 1970 date correlates with the event in which Antonio Manuel urinated inside a Coca-Cola bottle. Nevertheless, Antonio Manuel produced the image in 1975. On the same page of the catalogue, the editors explained (in English) the event as follows: “This work reproduces the photograph taken from the exhibition The New Critique, by Frederico Morais, which took place at the Petit Galerie in Rio de Janeiro. Commenting on one of Cildo Meireles’s works in his series Insertions into Ideological Circuits, Morais occupied the whole gallery floor with 15,000 bottles of Coca-Cola. The photographic reproduction shows Frederico Morais and Mário de Andrade at the front and the artists Dionísio Del Santo, Antonio Manuel (urinating in a Coca-Cola bottle) and Jackson Ribeiro at the back. The caption reads: For a new critique: Frederico Morais used non-verbal language and filled the gallery with medium-sized Coca-Cola bottles.”
Manuel’s statement clarifies the notion that the circulation of the bottles as altered by Meireles’s presentation of them (one full and one half-full), indicates that consumption and appropriation are intertwined. Manuel inferred that Meireles’s bottles were appropriations of Décio Pignatari’s *beba coca-cola* (1957) and other artworks based on the strategy of an open system. Yet, Manuel suggests that the circuitry of objects and their references all point out to the multiple understandings of the term *cola*. In Portuguese, *cola* also means glue or the act of cheating on an exam. In Mário Pedrosa’s view, Meireles’s cheating act is not fully complete if the consumption of the product is not altered.

Mário Pedrosa believed that the only way to sabotage the industrial process was to corrupt the product that it circulated. Such sabotage would entail breaking with all illusions of the art world and turning one’s back on it. Substituting the soft drink with urine would signify more than just repackaging the bottle; it would make consumption an unpleasant and dangerous endeavor. The act would cast doubt on the brand and the entire food system, betraying the promise of easy pleasure. Manuel was more than willing to take the transgressive step, but the prank was aborted along with the exhibition itself.

These two responses were the most significant at the time. And though one could view them as appropriations of the Coca-Cola bottles used by Meireles or an appropriation of Meireles’s insertion strategy, this study argues that they, above all, introduce feedback into the series. Ultimately, Morais and Manuel were acting upon Meireles’s provocation (as suggested in the instructions he wrote on the Coca-Cola bottles: to insert critical opinions into ideological
circuits). Appropriation,\(^{193}\) if understood conventionally—that is, the use of a well-known image in another artist’s work—does not accurately apply to the works of Manuel or Morais.

Meireles’s insertion strategy was something new, at least given the specific terms that governed the work. Still, as Manuel notes, the Coca-Cola brand and the readymade had been used by so many artists that Meireles’s work might be seen as a reenactment of artistic clichés. And if we follow that line of thought, Manuel’s work would be considered a pastiche, an appropriation of an appropriation in which the original tends to disappear.\(^{194}\) But another element in Manuel’s practice confirms that his work represents feedback to Meireles’s series, not simply an appropriation of it. Manuel states that he created many of his *flans* in homage to critics and artists that he admired.\(^{195}\) *This Is It* was one such homage, a gift for Frederico Morais.

In the documentary *Um Domingo com Frederico Morais* [A Sunday with Frederico Morais]\(^{196}\) Meireles states about Morais’s intentions:

> It seems that it was not exactly the critic taking, let’s say, the role or the place of the artist, but it was yet a critic relating to the object of the critique through the same medium of the object of the critique. The same way that a literary critic is exercising his critique through a text […] maybe the ideal cinematographic critique should be filmed, rather than a text about the movie. The same would apply to the fine arts. The idea was not become or to act as, or say, to occupy that place as an artist, but yet as a critic using that language, that medium.

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\(^{194}\) Jameson, *Postmodernism*, 16.


In a similar vein, Morais thought that his critique would be more effective if it used the same materials that his target work used. Both Morais’s and Manuel’s works were a form of feedback to Meireles’s *Coca-Cola Project*, and the works themselves were new insertions into the art system. This makes these responses all the more poignant.

**Uncertainties and Noise: Tampering with the Feedback Principle**

When asked about influences on his work, Meireles mentions among others the quantum physicist, Werner Heisenberg. When one attempts to unearth precise information about the events surrounding the *Insertions* series and related articles, catalogues, and interviews conducted by Meireles throughout his career, one quickly encounters temporal discrepancies. This study argues that part of this imprecision stems from Meireles’s enactment of Werner Heisenberg’s uncertainty principle. The ambiguity enhances the unpredictability of the patterns of organization present in his series, a result of the complex, open system inherent to his work.

Meireles’s interest in the uncertainty principle may be his poetic appropriation of quantum physics. This engagement may be observed in the artworks in which Meireles

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197 Scovino, Cildo Meireles, 168. Meireles asserts that, around 1970, he was very interested in Heisenberg’s uncertainty principle and the ways in which it could help demonstrate the illusion of objectivity.

198 Hallsal, *Systems of Art*, 43.

199 At [http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/qt-uncertainty/](http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/qt-uncertainty/). “It may refer to a lack of knowledge of a quantity by an observer, or to the experimental inaccuracy with which a quantity is measured, or to some ambiguity in the definition of a quantity, or to a statistical spread in an ensemble of similarly prepared systems. Also, several different names are used for such uncertainties: inaccuracy, spread, imprecision, indefiniteness, indeterminateness, indeterminacy, latitude, etc. As we shall see, even Heisenberg and Bohr did not decide on a single terminology for quantum mechanical uncertainties. Forestalling a discussion about which name is the most appropriate one in quantum mechanics, we use the name ‘uncertainty principle’ simply because it is the most common one in the literature.”
investigates physical relations between objects (*Eureka: Blindhotland*, 1975, for instance), but it is even more apparent in the artist’s tendency to craft multiple, sometimes conflicting, stories about his work. This propensity creates unpredictability—which is, according to Heisenberg, akin to what happens to the smallest particle, the electron, when observed.

Heisenberg stated that it was not possible to measure with a high degree of certainty the current and future position of a particle. The more data one gathers about a particle’s current position, the greater degree of uncertainty one will have about its future position. This subatomic behavior echoes the different art historical accounts about the *Insertions* series: as one attempts to look closely at its present status, its future becomes increasingly murky.

This position of uncertainty also resonates with the behavior of a complex system. This study argues that because Meireles used bottles and banknotes that were already part of the circulation system of goods and capital, the system became the medium. In addition, because his art proposition is also an appropriation of art history (in reference to Marcel Duchamp and Andy Warhol), his work appears as an “emergence” in the autopoiesis of art historical behavior as well.

Meireles is aware of the effect that art historians and critics have on his works. He meddles with their work by adding layers of information and choosing not to refute the narratives he likes.\(^{200}\) The new information added by Meireles also operates, in cybernetic terms,\(^{200}\) The controversies and recovery of the curatorial discourse by Meireles were exemplified in an interview with the artist. In the catalogue for the 2001 exhibition at the former Braziliense gallery, Arte Futura, Meireles made some telling statements in an interview. He noted that the 1984 (first) version of his work, *Desvio para o Vermelho* [*Red Shift*] (1967–2000), was not aimed at addressing politics. He thought of it as a collection of different types of red color found in everyday life objects. However, when Paulo Herkenhoff invited Meireles to the XXIV São Paulo Biennial in 1998, one of the works presented was *Red Shift*. To Meireles’s surprise Herkenhoff had associated the piece with the political situation in Brazil in the catalogue. Meireles believed Herkenhoff was inspired by the true story he told him about an
as noise in the communication process. The artwork, the artist, and the audience are part of the system in which the *Insertions* series operates. The communication takes place in this triple flow of information that moves in different directions simultaneously. The objects first communicated through the “clearing” of the space at MoMA—that is, suspending the communication process by being illegible to an American audience. The second communication, at Petit Galerie, was provoked by the first and represents a feedback of the objects’ trajectory. Thus, the first response (Morais’s thousands of empty Coca-Cola bottles) enabled the illegibility of Meireles’s message inside the industrial circuit. That response conveyed the potential to fetishize the artwork as a couple of bottles prominently placed amid all the other bottles.

Morais’s radical work is only cited briefly in an article that Meireles edited for *Malasartes* magazine in 1975, where it is mentioned when he first discusses the *Insertions* series. Although Meireles could have interpreted Morais’s response in 1970 as noise in the communication he was propagating, Meireles seemed to take the response to heart: in a 1975 publication at *Malasartes*, the Coca-Cola bottles are half-empty, full, and completely empty.

Paradoxically, while Meireles was interested in the uncertainty principle, he intended to avoid noise in his own system, by creating pedagogical narratives about his series. He explains

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Cildo Meireles, “Quem Se Desloca Recebe, Quem Pede Tem Preferência (Gentil Cardoso),” *Malasartes*, No. 01 (Rio de Janeiro, 1975), 14. Guilherme Vaz’s text, “Pequena Notícia Meteriológica,” was compiled by Meireles and mentions Morais’s *A Nova Crítica*. 201
the project and describes the procedures required to replicate his actions. In some sense, he is trying to control the reading of the project by indicating the location of the instructions on the bottle and explaining his intentions. There is significant anxiety about the audience’s feedback in the core of the series. For instance, Meireles mentioned that he never sold one of his Coca-Cola bottles, but without his knowledge, an art gallery in Rio de Janeiro was fabricating the objects and selling them. Indeed, the instructions and the openness of the project allow for such indefinite replication. Therefore, this reproducibility creates a dilemma in terms of reporting the history of the object without accounting for its different appearances. Every institutional report about the series produces some noise in the communication. The dates, quantities, and messages are likely to be fraught with imprecision—we simply don’t know where or when the works circulated. Likewise, we don’t know how many were produced or which messages were etched on the bottles and banknotes. Ultimately, noise could be derived from the series’ lack of clarity and precision stemming from the different mediums (banknotes versus bottles), the dates of fabrication, the places it was exhibited, and the articles that discussed it.

The anxiety of control—that is, a futile attempt to control the messages inserted into a volatile system—was established, and Meireles recognized that he should be restrained by the system and allow only some feedback to form the canon of the projects. This understanding reinforces the circulatory aspect of the Insertions series. The, “Insertion into Ideological Circuits: to register information and critical opinion on Coca-Cola bottles and return them to circulation,” would function as inserting information and critical opinion about the Coca-Cola bottles and returning them into the ideological art circuit.

202 Oliveira, Cildo Meireles, interview with the author.
Kitty Zijlmans, in summarizing the ideas of sociologist, Niklas Luhmann, describes a work of art as a, “communicative act in a very specific, once-only temporal/spatial context.” Context is established at the moment of communication, when the communicative utterance is enacted. The success of a message depends upon the situation: because other communication possibilities exist, the one that is selected takes on new meaning. And if the communication is successful, it will generate more communicative acts. Meireles seemed to understand this governing principle of the social system and the ways that communication increases complexity. In Zijlmans’s words:

Communications which are successful incite more communications and this contingent process leads to an ever-increasing complexity of communications. This is how systems produce, build, themselves as it were. There is nothing beyond or outside the operations of the system. When art works are regarded as communications, it is not their materiality which is relevant, or its maker, but the work as a communicative act responded to by new communicative utterances, positive or negative, in the form of other art works or as criticism.203

This principle of systems communication—understanding that art and art history are also systems of communication—is used by Meireles in his writing and art creation. Another way of creating uncertainties about the context, motivations, premises, dialogues, and references of his artistic practices (and in so doing, avoiding rigid categorizations, such as conceptual art, guerrilla art, or environmental art) is to explore his daily life and childhood experiences. Meireles is interested in the oral tradition, transmitting knowledge and values through fables.

In an interview in January of 2011, Meireles said that he wrote “O Cruzeiro do Sul” [The Southern Cross]204 in 1970 on the way to Belo Horizonte by train. He was going to participate in an exhibition, Do Corpo à Terra, which was also curated by Frederico Morais. “The Southern

203 Quoted in Halsall, *Systems of Art*, 11.
204 The text can be found in the appendix.
Cross.” Meireles’s statement about his participation in INFORMATION, had to be sent in advance to MoMA due to a publishing deadline, and it was eventually published in the INFORMATION catalogue. But the work to be presented in the exhibition was transported later by ship to eschew the post office strike in The United States. Hélio Oiticica, the only Brazilian artist to travel to that exhibition in New York, looked after the artwork. “The Southern Cross” ended up sharing the same name as one of the works that referenced minimalist poetics and aimed to be the smallest handmade cube possible. The cube was 9 mm on each side and made of two types of wood used by the indigenous Tupi tribe to produce fire: pine and oak in equal measure. Though it was completed, Meireles did not send the cube to INFORMATION.205

One week after the opening of Do Corpo à Terra, Meireles went to the beach on the outskirts of Rio de Janeiro with some friends. On their way back, they stopped by a restaurant where one of Meireles’s friends told him that an olive pit, once inside a Coca-Cola bottle, could not be washed out of it (despite of a mechanical cleaning process used in the industry). That afternoon, Meireles wrote a one-page document about this anecdote. Two or three days after writing the text, Meireles decided to reread it and clarify his ideas by using a Coca-Cola bottle as an example. He had a friend help him produce the vitrified silkscreen message on the Coca-Cola bottle that was ultimately sent to MoMA. The text was not published in the INFORMATION catalogue. Rather, it was later published in the first edition of Malasartes in 1975. That magazine

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205 Herkenhoff et al, Cildo Meireles, 106–107. “The Southern Cross” article and its homonymous artwork were published side by side in this exhibition catalogue. Usually, Meireles exhibits the work alone in a large room. To oppose the minimalist spatial experience of a spectator being on the same level of the artwork, Meireles intends for a spectator to inhabit the empty space. This novel view alludes to the symbolic and potential power contained in such a small piece. In The Southern Cross, Herkenhoff sees condensed symbolism and an anti-monumental sculptural practice. In addition to this perspective, it is important to recognize that, with The Southern Cross, Meireles is carrying out a long-standing strategy of clearing the museum space so that a territory may be occupied.
proved to be pivotal in Brazil at that time, and it is assessed in the next chapter, in which the focus is the circuit in Meireles’s perspective in 1975.

The one-page text and the objects—the bottles of Coca-Cola and banknotes with messages—often appear in exhibition catalogues with revised versions of the text and of the project itself all under the same name: *Insertions into Ideological Circuits*. The range of information associated with the series results from Meireles’s strategy of inserting the multiple interpretations of the work into the art world. He performs this action through the dating process he implements in his works and through the designation of some works as unlimited editions, which makes the series an open-ended project. This temporal flexibility (in terms of the dates and versions of the series) makes it possible for him to incorporate different outside and personal accounts into an object’s origin story. This capacity to complicate the art historical discourse endows the series with self-reflexive criticism—a partial insertion into society—and spreads Meireles’s *Insertions* throughout the art world.

In summary, this chapter introduced the Morais and Manuel feedback to the *Insertions into Ideological Circuits*. It also described Meireles’s strategies to deal with the feedback principle. Because the feedback reveals the power of the art system as the primary source of feedback to Meireles’s work, the next chapter turns the attention to the art system as an ally of the artists and, at the same time, a place of rivalry between new artists and institutionalized agents of the circuit. The fifth chapter therefore analyzes the INFORMATION catalogue as a coauthor of the artistic propositions made by the artists, and describes the new version of the series, namely the *Insertions into Anthropological Circuits*. 
CHAPTER 5—THE PROBLEM OF PROVINCIALISM

The art world of New York had a hegemonic position as the legitimator of the practices and criteria used in art in the 1970s—or as Terry Smith analyzes, the New York position refers to “the provincialism problem” on a global scale. This fifth chapter discusses how this issue was manifested in the reflections of artists such as Meireles and in concerns of curators like McShine, who was trying to expand the type of art and practices usually promoted by MoMA. In contrast to this hegemonic provincialism, the INFORMATION catalogue promises a space of equal visibility within which artists would leave their idiosyncratic contributions to the world. Yet this interest was also ambiguously perceived by Latin American artists as pragmatic opportunity to show their work, and as an American desire for the exotic.

This fifth chapter discusses the circumstances that provoke Meireles to create the second series of the Insertions. *Insertions into Anthropological Circuits* came to life in the midst of Meireles’s disenfranchised position while living in the United States. To understand the situation in which Meireles decided to live in the United States, one should review the precarious and repressive conditions of the art circuit in Brazil, which became visible after the outcry from art critics following the São Paulo Biennial boycott. Moreover, it is pressing to understand how self-exile and opportunity are entangled in Meireles’s attempt to escape such conditions. This chapter ends with Meireles’s return to Brazil to reengage in the local art circuit.

**INFORMATION Catalogue: Preparing the Terrain for Art in a Globalized Era**
In the seventies, major institutions in the United States were starting to debate the representation of artists whose work they were collecting. The dispute involved artists trying to reshape the conservative forces inside institutions, which were excluding experimental works from collections or misrepresenting (or not representing) the artistic practices of different nations. With INFORMATION and its catalogue, McShine sought to overcome the issue of provincialism in art exhibitions and to support artistic practices conscious of the contradictions of a globalized era.

The INFORMATION catalogue is presented as an independent project of the exhibition curated by McShine. The catalogue consists of artists writing about their work for this specific exhibition. A few texts instruct the museum on how to execute an artwork (as is the case with Lucy Lippard’s and Sol LeWitt’s writing). Other writing within the catalogue includes proposals for artists’ plans for a particular show or a production of a general artistic activity. Beyond that, the catalogue contains letters of response to the invitation, ranging from straightforward telegrams to personal statements.

There were ninety-six artists featured in the exhibition, but it is not immediately clear whether their writings were exhibited alongside the artworks at MoMA (or whether the writings were the artworks). Only through the checklist at MoMA’s registrar department can one verify who exhibited his or her work and who did not. There are few images—some taken by television networks and newspapers, some provided by the artists to serve as documentation. This particularly inventive aspect of the INFORMATION catalogue is due to McShine’s take on the

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idea of the global village and his response to the supposed decrease of books as a communicative system.

For McShine, what mattered about Marshall McLuhan’s assertions about systems of communication was the possibility of widespread broadcast of the political, social, and economic crises around the world. McShine shared his preoccupations about the increasing threats (and subsequent oppression) that political authoritarian systems presented in different regions of the world. To encapsulate this concern, he asked the invited artists the following question: “What can you as a young artist do that seems relevant and meaningful?”

McShine continued to declare that art relevant within such a technological context should rethink its traditional categorizations and extend its boundaries to include photography, poetry, theater, and so on. And, its ambition should be to reach a broader audience and address the cultural complications of the information era (beyond provincialism). This attempt to avoid any provincialism was also present in Brazilian artists’ work, especially pieces created by Meireles and Oiticica. Both artists stated that they did not represent a nation via their exhibitions, but the texts they produced later revealed a contradiction: distinctly Brazilian imagery appeared constantly in their writings (through geographical references and historical events). Still, Oiticica affirmed that his experimental accomplishments with Tropicália were individual in nature—to see that work as representative of a Brazilian movement was not only a mistake, but also a manifestation of conservative forces used to export an image of a country that does not really exist in the international arena.

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207 McShine, INFORMATION, 138.
208 Hélio Oiticica’s statement in McShine, INFORMATION, 103.
Meireles attested in interviews throughout his career that his interest in indigenous people stemmed from a powerful metaphor inherent in ghetto logic.\textsuperscript{209} His “The Southern Cross” text, however, gives plenty of room for stereotypical interpretations of a tropical, Dionysian jungle that will eventually replace all the “sterilized beaches” and “hysterical intelligence” of the East of Tordesilhas.\textsuperscript{210}

Guilherme Vaz contributed a picture of four indigenous people to the catalogue (Figure 33). He did not include any text or reasoning for selecting that particular picture, and he did not present any work at INFORMATION. One wonders why the invitation to participate in an American exhibition would prompt Vaz to offer up an image of indigenous people, subject matter that might imply a concern with the notion of national identity. Nationalism was a difficult issue for artists trying to enter the international art context. Modern art from Brazil was often considered derivative of the mainstream art—an artistic expression associated with primitivism and naïveté\textsuperscript{211}—and the political situation in Brazil was deemed problematic by many.

\textsuperscript{209} Paulo Herkenhoff, “Cildo Meireles, or the Forgetting of Brazil,” in Cildo Meireles: Geografia do Brasil, 83. Herkenhoff describes Meireles’s interest in using ghetto symbolism as a kind of metaphor that addresses the social displacement of people. According to the author, “Cildo engages with the notion of the ghetto, a situation of oppressive social confinement which he can turn into a place where information circulates more intensively. One metaphor for this ghetto is the vacuum, where the air that might transmit the cries of the oppressed seems to be lacking.” Translation provided in the book.

\textsuperscript{210} Cildo Meireles’s statement in McShine, INFORMATION, 85. The Treaty of Tordesilhas was an agreement signed in 1494 by Portugal and Spain to divide certain land that had been discovered (and would be discovered) during the maritime expeditions to the New World. The original treaty divided the world into western and eastern, but according to Paulo Herkenhoff, one could read Meireles’s article as repositioning of the dividing line. Herkenhoff asserted that Meireles’s line ran horizontally, indicating a division between the north and south hemispheres instead.

\textsuperscript{211} Geraldo Mosquera, ed. Beyond the Fantastic: Contemporary Art Criticism from Latin America (London: INIVA, 1995).
One possible reason for the artists’ ambiguous comments on nationalism was the need to dissociate themselves from the authoritarian powers of the Brazilian government. After all, the government had just shut down the MAM—Rio exhibition of artists preselected to the *VI Youth Biennial* in Paris. In a text published under the pseudonym Luis Rodolpho, Mário Pedrosa—one of the organizers of that exhibition—rebutted the motives expressed by the Foreign Affairs Minister at the time, Sr. Magalhães Pinto. Pinto stated in the newspapers that the selection commission had violated the rules of the event, which prohibited ideological and political content.

In general, Pedrosa voiced his indignation about political authoritarianism and the fragile state of the visual arts. Interestingly, his observation that censorious law enforcers had never targeted art before (outside of spectacles such as theater and cinema) reveals the dimension in which art was about to ingress—that of spectacle on a global stage.

But this era of informational, transnational exhibitions began (and continues) with suspicions on both sides of the equation: the institutional (private and governmental) patronage and the artists’ production and participation. McShine thoroughly investigated these suspicions before INFORMATION. Leading up to that exhibit, he was interested in what newspapers were reporting about Brazil, and he contemplated how to show the public what was really happening in the experimental artistic practices of Brazil and the United States.

One of the articles at the MoMA Archive that McShine used to conduct research for INFORMATION, is an American newspaper article written by Frederick Tuten: “Bienal Down

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212 There is no evidence that the artists received any public funding to participate in the exhibition.
in Brazil,” 1969. In the article, the journalist addressed the withdrawal of numerous delegations (the United States, France, Holland, Sweden, Denmark, and Venezuela) from the X São Paulo Biennial (1969) and the derivative nature of the majority of the artworks at that exhibition.

Tuten also noted that, “of the various kinds of contemporary art represented in the Biennial, conceptual art and its manifestations somehow eluded even the most avid trackers of the new art path.” After enumerating how the artists in question imitated the previous accomplishments of other artists, he outlined the debates in the inauguration conference. These debates involved curators, critics, and museum directors, and they centered on the biennial system and ways to improve it.

One suggestion was as follows: “Since the artists chosen by national commissions did not always represent the best artists of the countries concerned, an independent committee [should] be created to invite worthy artists not sponsored by their own countries.” Thus, it is not by chance that this article was part of the research material for INFORMATION—the questions it posed ranged from the sustainability of the art world, to art’s connections with political and economic powers, to crises involving critical discourse and artistic recognition.

Art historian Aracy Amaral asserted in her article, “The Boycott to the X Biennial: Extension and Meaning (1970),” that Frederick Tuten’s analysis was incomplete. Unfortunately, Tuten did not properly address the motives for the withdrawal of the different delegations.

215 Ibid.
216 Ibid.
delegations from the X São Paulo Biennial and the fact that Brazilian critics were conspicuously absent from the ceremonies and official events promoted by the X São Paulo Biennial organization.

For Amaral, the lack of communication weakened the complete devotion of artists and critics to the boycott. Still, many were committed to the cause, which proved that the artist class (traditionally disunited) was aware of the gravity of the situation. The lack of artistic production after the X São Paulo Biennial—which Amaral called a lack of information about what was being done outside Brazil—was also a boycott victory. Because of this reduced exhibiting of established Euro-American models, Brazilian artists have nothing new to follow; if they did, it would reinforce the idea of provincialism in art production. Thus, when McShine formulated an exhibition that exceeded the scope of provincialism, he was touching on a major artistic concern of the time.218

In New York, a few months before the opening of INFORMATION, the Art Workers’ Coalition (AWC) emerged as the artists’ reaction to curatorial and museum authoritarian administration. The organization also catalyzed the artists’ intentions to bring art into the fight for the Civil Rights movement and against the Vietnam War. The collective of artists started in 1969 and met until 1971. They pressured the MoMA, Guggenheim, Whitney, and Metropolitan museums to include a percentage of minority artists (or artists not represented at all) and to offer free admission.

218 Bryan-Wilson, Art Workers, 184–202. The author describes the performance/intervention by the Guerilla Art Action Group in November 19, 1969, which was titled A Call for the Immediate Resignation of All the Rockefellers from the Board of Trustees Museum of Modern Art. Later, it became known as Blood Bath.
A series of demonstrations and letters to museums followed the meetings, held first at the Chelsea Hotel and later at the New York School of Visual Arts. Emblematic of this time is a poster created collaboratively by five members of the AWC with newspapers images. The poster depicts a massacre in Vietnam: a road full of corpses of women and children. The artists wrote “Q: and babies? A: and babies” on the image. It was used in a protest demonstration at MoMA. Prior to seeing the image, the museum had agreed to finance reproductions of the image and circulate them in their facilities. Despite the board of trustees withdrawing their support after seeing it, McShine published the image in the INFORMATION catalogue. Even then, there was no guarantee that the catalogue would not be censored at the exhibition.219

These kinds of controversial maneuvers on the part of the museums’ trustees and administrators were the target of many artworks made after the seventies. Hans Haacke, Daniel Buren, and Mel Bochner created conceptual artworks addressing the issues of legitimation and exhibition of art objects, and they exposed political influences and economic imperatives inside the institutional art world. According to these artists, the production of art objects might be irrevocably bound to their circulation and collection potential. In sum, they emphasized the ephemeral aspects of artwork. Also, they pointed out the museum workers’ (curators, educators, and even trustees) tendency toward ambivalence when their institutions were critiqued by artists. For that reason, Hans Haacke did not explain in detail the question he would pose for his work when he submitted his application form (the same form that was published in the INFORMATION catalogue) for the show.220

219 Ibid.

220 Bryan-Wilson, Art Workers, 195. Bryan-Wilson read an anonymous sketch she found among Lucy Lippard’s papers in the Archives of American Art at the Smithsonian Institution. It served as a counterpoint to the idea that there was a higher degree of radicalism in the Latin American version of
In *MoMA Poll*, Haacke displayed two transparent ballot boxes into which viewers could deposit their opinion about the following question: “Would the fact that Governor Rockefeller has not denounced President Nixon’s Indochina Policy be a reason for you not to vote for him in November?” The project was designed to provoke the audience to think about Rockefeller’s ethics as a governor and to instill doubts about Rockefeller’s contribution as a MoMA trustee.

According to the art historian Julia Bryan-Wilson, the attempt to withdraw the work from the exhibition happened immediately. Nevertheless, the museum director, John Hightower, advised Governor Rockefeller to respect the institution’s freedom of speech—and to understand that the acceptance of an open and public critique would be favorable to his own credibility and that of the institution. During that conversation, Hightower clearly stated that INFORMATION was part of an institutional response intended to appease some of the demands made by the Art Workers’ Coalition. One wonders whether *MoMA Poll*, because of its triumph in the face of imminent censorship, obfuscated the anti-imperialist, antiwar attack launched by Meireles in the same exhibition.

**Meireles’s Own Insertion into Anthropological Circuits**

In 1970, anticipating a notion that Terry Smith discussed in the article “The Provincialism Problem” (published in *Artforum* in September of 1974), Meireles crafted his

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criticality (in which the artists abandoned the museum premises in search of greater interference within the society). This idea was constructed in opposition to the lesser radicalism extant in Euro-American versions of conceptual art that Bryan-Wilson proved false. After all, the sketch was an exhibition proposal completely devoted to providing viewers with information highlighting the negative aspects of the Vietnam War that exemplifies the ideological radicalism of American artists.

221 Ibid., 192.

222 It is important to highlight that this article was republished in the first issue of *Malasartes* magazine in 1975, after Meireles returned to Brazil.
strategy. Meireles seemed to intuit that his contribution to INFORMATION could not be based on a work already accepted by the public—as mentioned before, Brasília Boxes was part of the set of works that earned Meireles first prize at the Salão da Bússula. He wanted to complicate his conversation with the American audience. But how could Meireles—as a foreigner—respond to an invitation to make art that mattered in a political and social context when he was not representing Brazil? After all, he was a foreigner in the sense that he was not American and in the sense that he had positioned himself as a provincial artist.

At that point in time, the concept of provincialism had secured a place of prominence in the minds of many people throughout the world. The idea referenced the unanimously accepted position of New York’s art world as the art-making hub—a legitimation it gained after World War II. According to Smith, the peripheral artists who took into account the achievements of artists championed by critics, art historians, and patrons in New York were often deemed derivative. But the artists who completely ignored the art (and art historical writing) created in New York conceded their withdrawal from the realm of art history in the twentieth century. Before the seventies, this conundrum was even more accentuated by the limitations of transportation and communication between countries. Smith wrote the following:

But the geographical isolation is only one measure of cultural distancing from metropolitan centers. It is inescapably obvious that most artists the world over live in art communities that are formed by relentless provincialism. Their worlds are replete with tensions between two antithetical terms: a defiant urge to localism (a claim for the possibility and validity of “making a good, original art right here”) and a reluctant recognition that the generative innovations in art, and the criteria for standards of “quality”, “originality”, “interest”, “forcefulness”, etc., are determined externally. Far from encouraging innocent art of naïve purity, untainted by “too much history and too much thinking,” provincialism, in fact, produces highly self-conscious art “obsessed with the problem of what its identity ought to be.”

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Perhaps, at the time of an inchoate postcolonial discourse, the marginal artistic position of Meireles, Oiticica, Barrio, and Vaz had been seen by the artistic community and enacted by them through the figure of the colonized. People from Brazil and other Andean countries in South America constantly measured themselves against standards of “higher” civilization found in modernized European and North American countries. Other countries, such as Uruguay, Chile, and Argentina have staked out different positions. In the international art world, those countries tend to embrace political and economical isolation and inoperative artistic systems. They are less concerned with their indigenous heritage because internal wars have decimated or completely repressed those indigenous peoples.

But regardless of how Meireles’s words—“Yankees Go Home!”—came to exert an influence on the art world, some may have thought he believed in the naive myth of a paradisiacal region, that would be capable of resisting civilization and its waves of mass-produced goods. This unresolved opposition between metropolis and province gained force

224 Barrio was the only one who did not reference national identity in the catalogue—maybe because he is Portuguese, maybe because it was not an issue for him. At INFORMATION show, he presented pictures of the work he performed in Belo Horizonte in the exhibition Do Corpo à Terra. The piece consists of bloody, wrapped pieces of meat. The meat is tied with cords that he placed in isolated parts of the city—near river banks and city drains, which alludes to the abandoned, tortured bodies that suffered at the hands of authoritarian regimes. These missing people formed the basis for this piece.


226 Amaral, Arte e Meio Artístico, 169. Aracy Amaral, in an article written in 1971, questioned Gerchman’s appropriation of native imagery. Gerchman inadequately and reductively justified his appropriation by saying that “international art is cultural imperialism.” This simplistic and fallacious primitivism—considering the fact that he was living in New York and had been educated in the urban city of Rio de Janeiro—did not satisfy McShine’s search for art that would break the binaries of the modernist canon. In MoMA’s Archives, there is a letter written by Gerchman in which he regrets not being present on the day McShine visited the studio he shared with two friends on Lafayette Street. Also, he further discusses his work with language, which was not included in the exhibition. In the same article, “Reflexões: o artista brasileiro II—e uma presença: Cildo Meireles” [Reflections: the Brazilian artist II—
within the writings of Latin American historians. One such historian, Marta Traba, tried to elevate the *province* side of the equation by suggesting the value of localism and the resistance of foreign culture.\textsuperscript{227}

However, Terry Smith clarified that, until the art circuit in New York City refrained from making univocal announcements about what constituted art and which artists mattered, the impasse posed by provincialism would exist in artistic practices around the world. Smith asserted the following:

> As the situation stands, the provincial artist cannot choose not to be provincial. The complex history of the ‘expatriates,’ most of whom eventually return, highlights this dilemma.

With variations, the pattern of expatriation is this: As soon as he is able the young provincial artist leaves for the metropolitan center where he picks up competencies for art-making in terms of the most obviously “advanced” style, along with a taste for at least some aspects of the center’s community dynamism (for example, the ready availability of a number of active audiences).\textsuperscript{228}

Meireles also—but differently—pursued this artistic path in 1971; he visited New York City (as part of the prize he won in the *Salão da Bússola*), and he stayed there for two years. While there, however, he could not immerse himself in the recognized artistic community because he was an outsider. During this period, he rethought his professional career and even

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\textsuperscript{228} Smith, “The Provincialism Problem,” 57.
contemplated abandoning art. At this time, Meireles was very self-aware of the contradictions inherent in his *Insertions* series; thinking about his work, and whether it should be exhibited, became a troubling exercise. In his own words, he recalled:

> How to explain the *Insertions* as an integrating part of museums’ collections, as a work of art? But soon I understood that they were not a souvenir, neither a series nor an issue. They truly were action samples. Thus, despite the impasse, I continued to create works of art. After all, conflict is the best camouflage.\(^{229}\)

It is clear that the recirculation of the objects in 1973 was an attempt to eschew such a contradiction. The camouflage that Meireles refers to, allows his actions to connect to different systems. Camouflage represents the adaptability inherent in the system as a medium—the site where discursive elements of the *Insertions* series change over time (as all artwork does). Meireles’s approach, however, created a unique effect—he introduced feedback, provided publishers and curators with explanations of his series, and sometimes disregarded the feedback of others he assumed were hoping to contribute to the circulation and self-organization of the *Insertions* series.

In New York, Meireles faced the “provincial mind,” to use Smith’s term, of the art world through another perspective: power dynamics in cultural construction which go beyond the national/international problem. The dynamics in cultural construction—that is, the notion of art itself—refers also to the constant and strong economic imperatives that support art production and its circulation.

Meireles tried to solve the contradiction of creating art objects in his next project within the series. *Insertions into Anthropological Circuits: Tokens* was an ongoing project in which

\(^{229}\) “Linguagem Material” by Frederico Morais, interview taken in April 2008 and partially published in the *TateEtc* magazine (Fall 2008) and reprinted at Scovino, *Cildo Meireles*, 221.
Meireles created numerous counterfeit coins that allowed free admission to the New York metro. Using linoleum found on the streets of the city, he cut out the exact shapes used in the turnstile metro stations and distributed them among his friends. At that time, the subway turnstiles operated on a mechanical level, and they only registered weight and shape. The tokens’ weights were not even the same, as the scales did not operate with precision, but shape mattered most, and Meireles’s coins were close enough.  

The conditions that restrict accessibility in people’s social circuit—the constraints of transportation and the potential for dislocation in modern cities—are also discussed in this project. Technological mechanisms help provide more services in less time; therefore, more hours of service are necessary to make more money. Technological societies tend to clump many services in a few locations, increasing the living expenses of downtown areas. People who have to live in residential areas built far away from downtown might pay less in rents and services, although they spend more time and more money in transportation to accomplish daily activities, concentrated in the city. Consequently, the distance between a person’s home and his or her work is one of the indicators of quality of life. With technology, the possibility to communicate through telephones increases communication between people, but not without a cost for this service that also increases living expenses. In this sense, the distribution of social opportunities is at the core of *Insertions into Anthropological Circuits*, and that notion reflects Meireles’s position during his stay in New York. 

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230 Oliveira, Cildo Meireles, interview with the author.

231 Cf. Rosalyn Deutsche, *Evictions: Art and Spatial Politics* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1996). In this book the author does not mention Meireles’s work but her discussion about the public space as a cultural construction and a broad term concealing the power struggle between different social strata is helpful to understand the problems that Meireles is addressing in his project. In her book, Deutsche points out how Krzysztof Wodiczko’s art projects were able to make clear some of the problems of capitalist
This project functions better as an oral element of Meireles’s narrative about his works than as an artwork or an art object. It maintains a site-specific intent in order to provide a service. It could only circulate in a clandestine manner, aiming a “state of grace”\(^\text{232}\) that would replace the managerial State service with an anarchic free service. Its recirculation has to be adapted to the formal specificities of the currency used in the desired service. For that reason, the coins that were recorded (and those that the public got to know through books and Wilson Coutinho’s documentary, \textit{Cildo Meireles}, 1979) were created with plaster cast and clay. The pottery version was created in 1979 with a Brazilian coin for telephone booths (Figure 34). The \textit{Insertions into Anthropological Circuits} artworks were the least effective (in terms of being a system that produced feedback) of Meireles’s \textit{Insertions} series. The works tried to introduce a parallel system beyond market and government control, but they were bound by those very systems. This limitation made it impossible to gain any traction or produce any lasting effects because the specter of criminal charges kept would-be rebels at bay.

\textbf{The Black Comb Project}

In the final project within the \textit{Insertions into Anthropological Circuits} series, Meireles states that he thought about paying homage to Paulo Cezar “Cajú,” a Brazilian soccer player who

\(^{232}\) Felipe Scovino, “Memórias,” Meireles’s new statements provided between June and July of 2007, in Scovino, \textit{Cildo Meireles}, 249. State of grace is an expression in Portuguese that has a religious connotation of beatitude, which means abundance by divine power. In the way Meireles uses it in his interviews, could also mean social relations free of State control.
was stigmatized at the end of the 1960s. His fans gave him this nickname after the player dyed his hair, as Cajú is the word for a reddish fruit color. Meireles was sympathetic to the lawsuit that the player levied against his employers for not honoring a verbal agreement (known as a *drawer contract* at the time) regarding his salary and job conditions that they had established before the championship started. The player helped his team win several important awards, and he was not compensated fairly for his contributions. Meireles stated that, after he went back to Brazil in 1973, he thought about doing some work with the athlete who was already known for his “black power hair” and for defending his rights. Meireles did not clarify how Paulo Cezar “Cajú” might participate, but it became a moot point when the player left to play for Paris Saint Germain and other soccer teams in Europe. Later, Paulo Cezar “Cajú” was killed in a car accident.

Most likely, Meireles was inspired by the fashion in black communities during his stay in the United States. During the 1960s and 1970s, many African-Americans were letting their hair grow naturally, without straightening or flattening it. Generally, they only used product in their hair to create a “blow-out” look. Young African-Americans were eager to attain racial equality and affirm their black identity. Some used picks and combs in their hair as a means of making a political statement. Thus, the *Black Comb* project might have stemmed from Meireles’s desire to introduce the racial debate into Brazilian social circuits. After all, many Brazilians erroneously believe that Brazil is a multicultural and inclusive country even though it permits substantial ethnic, economic, and political inequality.

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233 Oliveira, Cildo Meireles, interview with the author.
234 Ibid.
235 See www.jazma.com/black-hair-history.
236 Ibid.
Because confronting such a delicate facet of Brazilian culture would be very risky for Meireles, he needed an ally. Perhaps predictably, he turned to Duchamp for inspiration and as a guide for rethinking the symbolic and explicit power of everyday life objects—after all, Duchamp’s readymades are replete with subtle or hidden meanings. Whereas Duchamp asserts that his aim was to take an ordinary metal comb and inscribe a nonsensical sentence onto it, Meireles sought to appropriate an object already charged with significance and communicative potential. Duchamp wrote the following two messages on his readymade Comb (1916): “New York 17 February 1916 11:00 AM” and “three or four drops of height have nothing to do with savageness” (Figure 35). According to Thierry de Duve, the word comb (peigne in French) is a play on words that adds another level of complexity and interest to the readymade. When analyzing the cover of the 1938 Transaction magazine that featured Duchamp’s work, de Duve noted that the image and the magazine’s title are composed in such a way that the French name of the project and the title can be read as follows: “I ought to paint!” This reading adds a separate and perplexing element to Peigne because the object is clearly not a painting.

Meireles’s Black Comb project sketches do not indicate that the artist was particularly interested in the relationship between the object and its title or between the combs and their unique messages (Figure 36). Still, de Duve’s interpretation could lend credence to the idea that Meireles was interested in exploring another aspect of the readymade: its recirculation in magazines. In effect, Meireles may have been attempting to transform the readymade from a

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238 Ibid.

239 Thierry De Duve, *Pictorial Nominalism on Marcel’s Duchamp’s Passage from Painting to the Readymade*, (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1991), 162.
mere object into something that could be inserted into the communication system to enact a change in social behavior. The *Black Comb* project appeared first as a single image of a pick in 1975 in *Malasartes*, a Brazilian magazine which I will discuss in the final chapter. Later, he provided a short explanation of the intentions behind the project in his 1981 book. In the book, a photograph of *Black Comb* precedes the following description:

[It is a] project for production and distribution at cost price of combs for black people. In the series “Insertions into Ideological Circuits” the fundamental aspect is the finding of the existence of the circuit(s), and the verbal insertion is interference in this flow of circulation, that is, it suggests an act of ideological sabotage against an established circuit. Yet in the “Insertions into Anthropological Circuits” (“Black comb,” “Token”), what matters most is the notion of “insertion” rather than “circuit”: the making of objects, designed in analogy with those of the institutional circuit, aims at the introduction of a habit and, then, the possibility of characterizing a new behavior. In the particular case of “Black comb,” the project would work to affirm an ethnic group.

Meireles envisioned the social dimension of the circulation of readymade black combs as a transition from the institutional art circuit to a positive social circulation of people. It is important to note that Meireles conceived this project after black communities began fighting for their civil rights. After 1968, the American government withdrew the unfair conditions for voting and guaranteed *all* ethnic communities access to public schools and other buildings. The powerful nature of this revolution may have inspired Meireles to produce a work that would promote inclusiveness in urban areas via its circulation. This coincides with the agenda of the Art Workers’ Coalition artists collective in New York, which was to include in the institutional art world representatives from both genders and all ethnic groups.

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241 In the original text, Meireles uses the word *Negros*, a word that translates to *Negroes* in English. In Portuguese, however, it is not a pejorative word.
While in New York, Meireles never had the chance to realize the project; similarly, he did not bring the project to fruition in Brazil. He explained that he did not have enough money to produce the objects. Nevertheless, Meireles did not discount the possibility that the project might be developed in the future. Though it receded into the background for a while, some feedback reanimated the project in 2002. I will address this feedback in the Conclusion of this study.

**Yankees Go Home, Brazilians Return**

Meireles might consider the *Token* project, which attempted to use the transportation system in a subversive manner, as one of his “youth pretensions,” a literal and solitary revolutionary impulse in a system that permitted only the slightest ingress. But one could also see this desperate project as a reflection of his disenfranchised position in the United States. According to Smith, many artists tried to solve the problem of provincialism by moving to New York and trying to engage in the artistic community there. But because Meireles was one of the many artists who could not engage in that artistic community, he decided to return to Brazil. After all, he already had a group of willing participants in a fragile (but growing) alternative art circuit in Brazil.

As mentioned before, a crucial supporter of Meireles’s work was the art critic and curator, Frederico Morais. Morais had invited Meireles to participate in many exhibitions in Brazil, and he made his criticism of Meireles’s work as forms of artworks in themselves. He did this by first, creating the *Aguns Dei* exhibition, and secondly a stamp, which is piece of

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242 Oliveira, Cildo Meireles, interview with the author.

commentary in response to the artist’s work sent to MoMA at the time of INFORMATION. Morais’s work is archived at MoMA, but the archive contains no further information about its provenance. In my interview with Morais, he could not recall a precise date or details about the letter to MoMA. It is a sheet of paper stamped with the message “Brasileiros Retornem” [Brazilians Return] inside a square. Translated, the Portuguese text below the box reads: “Continuation of Cildo Meirelles [sic] work Yankees Go Home. Author: Frederico Morais” (Figure 37).

In an interview, Morais stated that many artists were exiled and a deterioration of the art scene ensued in the 1970s. He feared that the repressive regime would succeed in getting rid of intellectuals and artists in Brazil. For the ones who where in the country, resistance became even more challenging. Many artists who had worked with Morais were already living abroad. Brazilians Return is a linguistic statement, a stamp sent as mail art, which functions as a feedback to Meireles’s work. The message is slightly ironic because it can also be read as anti-immigration propaganda. Here, curator and artist are bound by a critique made in visual linguistic form; the art system operated as part of the realization of the general schema that the Insertions series presents.

Unfortunately, the Insertions series feedback often proved that the art system was constrained by organizing principles that cast the artist as the only authorial voice recognized by the institutional framework. Because Meireles (but not Morais) was invited to the exhibition, Brazilian Return was forgotten in the MoMA archives. This important piece positions the feedback principle as a fundamental mechanism of the art system—and consequently, one of the

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244 Oliveira, Frederico Morais, interview with the author.
245 Ibid.
concerns haunting participatory practices since that time. One wonders what Meireles might have done (given his vision of a democratic authorship) with Morais’s feedback. Why didn’t Meireles insert the visual feedback into his work in later catalogues? It seems that Meireles was also—though perhaps unintentionally—an advocate of the idea that the artist should be the main producer (or organizer, at least, of the artwork he or she creates).246 Thus, despite the fact that the series’ feedback exists in the form of Meireles’s actions, one cannot help but wonder how much richer the dialogue, catalogues, exhibitions, and series would be with additional feedback from other authors.

In my interview with Morais, he recalled that he later used the stamp in an attempt to convene the critics and artists who had gone into forced or voluntary exile back to Brazil.247 His appeal, which was submitted directly to critics but not to artists, is revealing because it demonstrates his preoccupation with the general abandonment of the Brazilian art circuit. Key figures in the Rio art circuit, such as the artists Hélio Oiticica, Rubens Gerchman, and Lygia Clark, were all living abroad. In addition, in 1971, the critics Mário Pedrosa and Ferreira Gullar were politically exiled.248 Morais presumed that alerting the heads of the institutional art circuit would raise awareness about the political turmoil and cause allies to flock to the fragile art circuit in Brazil. He surmised that they were capable of generating intrigue in, and creating a framework to address the situation by promoting shows and publications and spurring production.

246 “Lugares da Divagação” by Nuria Enguita, published in the catalogue Cildo Meireles: IVAM Centre del Carme (Barcelona: Generalitat Valenciana, Conselleria de Cultura, 1995) and reprinted at Scovino, Cildo Meireles, 106. Actually, Meireles affirms in this 1995 interview, that he untimely was the author of the Insertions; however the work could be made by other people. If in the beginning of his career he wanted the public to participate in his proposal, but as time went on he lost his desire for public participation.

247 Oliveira, Frederico Morais, interview with the author.

Later, Morais used the same message, “Brasileiros Retornem,” on an envelope (Figure 37). He sent me a photocopy of the envelope he had sent to the director of the Instituto Torquato di Tella, which was, in Morais’s words, “the most important space of the Argentine capital dedicated to the vanguard art during the 60/70s. And Romero Brest was undoubtedly the most important art critic in the country at that period—radical and feared.”249 Thus, Morais chose to employ postal art as a means of circulating his appeal. Interestingly, his work as a critic in this scenario resembled Meireles’s artistic strategy in his Insertions project. In this way, Morais progressed from a specific critique of Meireles’s work at INFORMATION to a general statement, a conceptual work reenacted for a different audience.

This fifth chapter has highlighted the importance of the different contexts in which Meireles situated himself and how these different contexts affect the specificities of the conceptualization of his projects. The chapter also analyzed the Insertions into Anthropological Circuits and another important feedback of the Insertions into Ideological Circuits made by Morais. This feedback announces the issues of the final chapter, because it invokes artists and critics to embrace the undesired Brazilian reality and commit to work for an improvement of the local art circuit. The sixth chapter therefore assesses the Malasartes magazine as a vital platform created by artists and critics at that time to debate recent issues in the international scenario and to show experimental contributions of Brazilian artists; it is also where feedback of Meireles’s series were first published. The sixth chapter ends with the description and analyzes of Meireles’s Zeros series, which dialogue with the Banknote Project. The Zeros series is a direct attack on the use value and symbolic value of currency in the capitalist system.

249 Frederico Morais’s statement in the text message to this author on May 26, 2013.
CHAPTER 6—INSERTIONS THRIVE

The discussion in this chapter centers on Meireles’s activities in Rio de Janeiro after his stay in New York. It centers on whether the ideological circuits Meireles was interested in were only of the industrial and State nature, or whether the art circuit was in fact, as I have been suggesting, an ideological circuit Meireles was problematizing as well. The central strategy of this chapter is to shift the emphasis from Meireles’s conceptualization and first exhibitions of the Insertions series to the subsequent strategies of divulgating and disseminating different versions of the series in a variety of media. These subsequent strategies were mostly pursued by Meireles as a way to overcome the ineffective art circuit in Brazil. While in the early 1970s, capitalist ideology was seen by Meireles as an enemy to be defeated, by the end of the decade, the lack of capitalist entrepreneurs collaborating with the promotion of local contemporary art was perceived as the cause of the failure of the art circuit in Brazil. Such a failure needed to be addressed by the artist and his peers. In this chapter, I argue that this strategic change adopted by Meireles is related to his attempt to expand the art system in Brazil and to insert his series in this very system, making the Insertions thrive throughout his career. Meireles’s reflections about the art circuit and its limitations does not mean an abandonment of capitalism as a source of inquiry, but an understanding of its complexity as a system within which his production is encompassed. Such complexity is analyzed in a series of works by Meireles (the Zero series) and in the maneuvers of art agents in both Brazil and United States addressing the problem of institutionalized circuits and the capital circulation and fetishization of the artwork. This last
point assessed in the chapter challenges Ramírez’s interpretation that conceptual artists in America were not considering ideological aspects in their context and production.²⁵⁰

**Malasartes Magazine and Beyond**

Back in Brazil, in 1973, Meireles reengaged in activities at the MAM—Rio and started to create different feedback (versions) of the *Coca-Cola Project*. He produced the English versions of the projects, a video, and two other bottle messages for which he received formal credit at Tate Modern’s 2008 *Cildo Meireles* exhibition (Figure 39). Meireles told me that his idea for producing the video came after he requested from MoMA a picture of *Coca-Cola Project* as displayed at INFORMATION.²⁵¹ When he received a negative answer, he told MoMA’s representatives that he would produce his own version of the event in 1973. According to Meireles, his statement caused MoMA to come up with a picture of the piece. Regardless, he produced a video for an exhibition which Aracy Amaral invited him to in 1973. Meireles presented the video about *Insertions into Ideological Circuits* and *Mebs/Caraxia* (1970–71) at the exhibition *Expo—Projeção* (1973)²⁵² (Figure 40 and Figure 41). According to Amaral, the exhibition was designed to present experimental art being produced on film or other audiovisual media. As Amaral explained it, artists around the world were trying to express reality via nonconventional means. They were also recording momentous events with videotape, for example, thus approximating the art of documentation.

²⁵⁰ Bryan-Wilson, *Art Workers*.
²⁵¹ Oliveira, Cildo Meireles, interview with the author.
Amaral’s initiative to organize the exhibition took place after the recurrent failures of the São Paulo Biennial to display contemporary art from Brazil and the rest of the world. The director of the Biennial Foundation, Francisco Mattarazo Sobrinho, centralized the management of the Biennial and eliminated the artistic director position. Despite the 1969 artists’ boycott, the Biennial Foundation maintained its conservative regime during the 1971 XI São Paulo Biennial (an event discussed in the first chapter), which did not feature Brazilian experimentalists or American artists.\footnote{Amaral, Arte e Meio Artístico, 180. Cildo Meireles, Antônio Dias, Hélio Oiticica, Mira Schendel, Tomoshigue Kusuno, Lygia Clark and Amélia Toledo did not participate in the exhibition.} Amaral denounced the rampant censorship and myriad of mistakes surrounding the event. Chief among her complaints was the fact that the Biennial Foundation did not divulge Argentine art historian Jorge Glusberg’s critique that there was a lack of Latin American and North American vanguard art at the event, and more importantly, the press did not publish the letter of reasons for his withdrawal from the event.

It is in this general context of dictatorial regime and censorship in the arts that Meireles resignified the Insertions into Ideological Circuits for new investments against the State’s ideological circuits. Five years after Meireles first conceptualized the Insertions series, he stamped a question—Quem Matou Herzog? [Who Killed Herzog?]|—on numerous one-Cruzeiro banknotes in 1975 (Figure 42). This project constituted an act of rebellion against the official narrative surrounding the death of a journalist captured by the military (the military alleged that it was suicide).\footnote{On March 15, 2013, exactly twenty-five years after the democratic government was implemented, Herzog’s family received a certificate declaring that his death resulted from injuries and mistreatment. His family had been pressuring the authorities to investigate the case further for many years.} Money—as an impersonal and high-speed circulatory object—became an anonymous vehicle for confrontation of and opposition to a hegemonic political voice.
This time, the message appears as a question on a banknote. It functions as a provocation, a question to which the accuser already knows (and observes) the answer: the killer was the State. The currency circulates as a marker, a stigma announced in big, stamped letters for everyone to see. Notably, the question does not follow the journalistic style for reporting facts. The phrase does not ask a litany of questions; it simply asks who is responsible. This simplification effectively dismantles the official news story by stripping the narrative down to its most crucial component. Elegantly, the medium completes the message; it provides the answer by virtue of its existence. And in the end, the ideological lies of the military system are exposed.

It was also in 1975 that Meireles and other intellectuals in Rio de Janeiro decided to create a magazine dedicated to the arts. The Malasartes magazine was a way to display the experimental production of artists and to publish articles about contemporary art. The magazine also served as a platform to show updates on issues discussed in the international art circuit to Brazilian audience. With the magazine, Cildo Meireles, Bernardo Vilhena, Carlos Vergara, Carlos Zilio, José Resende, Paulo Baravelli, Ronaldo Brito, Rubens Gerchman and Waltércio Caldas could discuss the most recent theoretical and artistic production—and they could question the omissions of the press and the misconduct of public institutions or the art market.

According to the architects Fábio Lopes de Souza Santos and Vanessa Rocha Machado, Malasartes explored two main themes throughout its articles: the art circuit (including the politics of art) and the reformulation of an idealized identity (evident in Brazilian modernists) to one compromised by urban spaces. In one piece by Carlos Zilio, “A Querela do

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before they obtained that statement. See http://g1.globo.com/sao-paulo/noticia/2013/03/familia-de-vladimir-herzog-recebe-novo-atestado-de-obito.html.

Brasil” [The Brazilian Complaint], and another article by Carlos Guilherme Mota, “A Ideologia da Cultura Brasileira” [Brazilian Cultural Ideology], the notion of a monolithic national identity was dismantled. Likewise, Lygia Pape, Carlos Vergara, and Miguel Rio Branco sought to undermine any sense of homogeneity in Brazil through their artworks. Thus, Malasartes also functioned as an alternative circuit for artists’ dissemination of their work and to critique the art circuit as a whole.

In the first issue, Meireles organized an “exhibition” to be published in the magazine. He presented works alongside Thereza Simões, Artur Barrio, Guilherme Vaz, Claudio Paiva, Tunga, Rubens Gerchman, Alfredo Fontes, Umberto Costa Barros, Luiz Alphonsus, Luiz Fonseca, and Silviano Santiago. Meireles’s works, Insertions into Ideological and Anthropological Circuits, were accompanied by an explanation of the projects and the concept of a circuit (Figure 43). He stated the following: “Circuit is the circulation by the repetition. Circuit is the cyclic repetition of an information trajectory through a vehicle.”

In his introductory note, Meireles addresses the relation between the art circuit and the commodities circuit. He explains how to redirect readymade objects and make them work inside a circulatory system (such as the distribution system used by Coca-Cola). Naturally, the soft drink company envisioned the bottles traveling from consumers’ houses to grocery shops to Coca-Cola factories to grocery shops again—and as I have discussed, that is the system that Meireles exploited. Ultimately, the circulation of goods, services, and money provided the impetus for much of Meireles’s assault on the art circuitry.

257 Cildo Meireles, “Quem Se Desloca Recebe, Quem Pede Tem Preferência (Gentil Cardoso),” Malasartes, No 01 (Rio de Janeiro, 1975), 15–23.
258 Ibid., 4.
Meireles’s interest in different circuits became clearer as he sought to clarify for himself and his peers how *Insertions* should play out. This development becomes obvious when one compares the first text written for the INFORMATION catalogue and Meireles’s texts and notes from 1970 (and those written in 1975 and 1995).259

In “Insertions into Ideological Circuits”—the text that was written in 1970 and published in the first edition of *Malasartes* in 1975—Meireles mainly speaks as an artist. He discusses the development of conceptualism and the dangers of misinterpreting Duchamp’s legacy. According to Meireles, artists could easily stop focusing on the skilled process of art making, but they must never cease their search for a conceptual solution to their art making—a solution that considers the problem of art circulation.260

Nevertheless, in 1970, Meireles wrote new notes (that were not published in *Malasartes*) about the idea of circuits and what steps needed to be taken in order to push his movement forward. These notes were revised and published in the 1999 catalogue of the traveling solo exhibition, *Cildo Meireles*, which was organized by Dan Cameron and Gerardo Mosquera.261

The notes provide some insight into the way Meireles understood insertions and circuits and how he employed interference *within* the objects. Likewise, they also shed some light on the Brazilian cultural context—more precisely, the common concerns of the *Malasartes* editorial staff. Another article written by Ronaldo Brito, “Análise do Circuito,”262 [Analysis of the Circuit] appeared in the same issue of *Malasartes* and echoes Meireles’s thoughts. Both

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259 Cildo Meireles, edited by Herkenhoff, Paulo, Gerardo Mosquera, Dan Cameron (London: Phaidon, 1999), 110—116. The texts are in the appendix of this dissertation.

260 Ibid.

261 Ibid.

Meireles’s notes and Brito’s article address the urge to create modes of circulation for contemporary Brazilian art.

In his analyses, Brito separates the art circuit and the market. Brito did not refer to the market as a single person or a specific class. In his text, the market sometimes seems to be portrayed as an abstract force devoid of subjects acting upon it. This separation that Brito implies is a reflection on the growth of art commercialization in Brazil in the 1970s.

Brito and the other founders and editors of Malasartes sought to understand and propose alternatives to the situation of the art circuit in Brazil. They were dissatisfied with the fact that the commercial galleries and auction houses—presumably what Brito was referring to when discussing the market—were governed by a militarized, conservative force that ruled the mechanisms of art legitimation.

For this ruling class, art served the traditional function of endowing a privileged status to its owner. That did not mean, however, that the Brazilian ruling class was not willing to absorb contemporary tendencies. Still, due to their lack of unawareness about the artistic debate, they bought and exhibited radical art in traditional places. This reality effectively neutralized some artistic propositions in the 1960s and 70s. If the artworks were not meant to be sold or exhibited as decorative objects, their significance was obliterated.

263 Jaremtchuk, “Espaços de Resistência.” According to Dária Jaremtchuk, there was a lot of interest on the part of the Brazilian elite in collecting modernist paintings from the 1920s to the 1940s. This means that this elite was not interested in the actual art being made in Brazil in the 1970s. Also, if they became interested, they would homogenize the issues brought to light in the 1960s and 1970s, with the art produced by the modernists in the beginning of the twentieth century.

264 Many of the experimental works produced by the neoconcrete artists were unsellable. The artworks required the participation of an audience, and they were made with objects that were not artistic objects per se—and not meant to last. Lygia Clark’s relational objects provide a good example of this situation.
In the article, Brito’s argument addressed the market ideology that pervaded all spheres of production. Brito contended that market ideology even pervaded the conceptualization of art in the artist’s mind and the way art was traditionally exhibited. Plus, such an ideology permeated the critical writing that isolated the artwork from its contexts. All these steps in art production and circulation tended to assimilate the market logic—reflecting the interests of art dealers and collectors. As Brito noted, artists, critics, dealers, collectors, and the public contributed to, reconfigured, and conserved the art circuit. To try to beat the market pressures, Brito suggested that universities and other institutions of public interest should embrace the art debate and amplify the critical discourses surrounding it.

Today, it is obvious that, despite the increase in art institutions and the expansion of art departments in public universities in Brazil following the 1990s, the logic of the market welcomes novelty (as Brito elucidated long ago). He argued that it is precisely this hunger for new audiences that makes possible the multiplicity of production and criticism. Even though Brito did not address the contradiction implicit in his own argument—that his criticism was dependent upon the means of production and the market pressures to sell (realities that hindered Malasartes and ended its short-lived publishing history at the end of 1976)—the separation he proposed between market and art circuit is hypothetical and not realistic. After all, his own article needed to be inserted into the art circulation through Malasartes.

In this manner, the logic of the market is ambivalent—it is merely capitalism and the actual art circuits. Art operates via its circulation and accumulates symbolic value as it passes through institutional or commercial circuits. The symbolic value is always placed in the
transaction of a cultural product.\textsuperscript{265} In institutional circuits, art does not operate differently than when it circulates throughout the market.

In this sense, the art circuit and the market are deeply imbricated, operating parallelly and having mutual implications. There were distinctions and nuances in the interests and operations of different agents in the art field in the 1970s, but together, their maneuvers constitute the art circuit.\textsuperscript{266} Indeed, this argument also coincides with a debate that became more heated when an article by Achille Bonito Oliva, “A Arte e o Sistema da Arte” [Art and the System of Art], was published in the last issue of Malasartes.\textsuperscript{267} The Italian art critic was invited to organize an international exhibition at Museum of Modern Art—Rio de Janeiro in 1976. His position as curator and his one-month stay was viewed suspiciously by the Malasartes editors. Those editors wrote an introductory note, warning readers of the speculative potential to be exploited by the inchoate Brazilian art market in the aftermath of Oliva’s exhibition.

Oliva’s article was published in Italy in 1975 before being published in Brazil. He contends that contemporary art was based on a three-part, interconnected system with the following participants: the artwork, the public, and the market. He argued that a vanguard practice was no longer possible for the current generation and that artists were aware of their limited role in the transformation of social and artistic systems. The vanguard’s rebellion against norms was completely absorbed by the market and the public. Plus, the vanguard had learned

\textsuperscript{265} See Bourdieu, \textit{The Rules of Art}.


that evolution into superior formal solutions was not necessarily inevitable. The developments of art cannot escape market contradictions; that is, the experimental aspects of the artistic practice are the marketable novelties desired by the public. In this view, experimentation is capable of competing with reproductive media such as cinema, photography, and television.\textsuperscript{268} From that point forward, commercialization of artwork became a problem because what matters in that process are the quantitative operations the market tries to maintain (which are not informed by the quality of artwork). Art, then, is seen as merchandize… and “the market as artwork.”\textsuperscript{269} “The market mechanism asserts its universality through the international distribution of the artistic product; it satisfies its needs through the misleading guarantee of survival and subsistence on the part of the artist; and it claims objectivity by channeling the cynical consciousness (in our capitalist system) of letting art exist and be recognized.”\textsuperscript{270}

For Oliva, the dilemmas facing the 1970s generation were as follows: to produce without succumbing to novelty, to admit that the cultural manifestations had impinged upon artistic production, and to confront the fact that art history should be contemplated in the context of the broader historical system.\textsuperscript{271} The so-called crisis in art production presented itself as citation and critical reflection about preceding art languages. And for critics, the crisis presented the only task possible: a critique of one’s own ideological position. Those critics were required to investigate

\textsuperscript{268} Oliva, “A Arte e o Sistema da Arte,” 25.
\textsuperscript{269} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{270} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{271} Ibid., 26.
“the typical contradiction between the neutrality of the analyses moment and the inevitable partiality of a management whose power is selective and discriminating.”

Oliva’s article may have incited a renewed critical assessment of the system of art. Former Malasartes editors Ronaldo Brito, Carlos Zilio, José Resende, and Waltércio Caldas in the Jornal Opinião all explored the system of art with fresh eyes in 1976. In “A Questão da Arte: O Boom, o Pós-Boom e o Dis-Boom,” [The Question of Art: The Boom, the Post-Boom and Dis-Boom] Brito had the opportunity to further explore his first “Analysis of the Circuit.” In this new article, Brito and his peers described the agonizing situation of the art circuit in a Brazilian context. If, as Oliva suggested, the system of art is constituted by artwork, the public, and the market (wherein the market is the driving force that keeps the system of art functioning), the ineffective market in Brazil was surely the target of scrutiny by critics and artists. After all, the lack of a structured market—in which ideologies concerning what constitutes the enterprise of art, which concepts are relevant, which sorts of linguistic investigation are valid, and so on—are not presented as a key part of the local art circuit.

The boom of the Brazilian art market from 1970–1973 was driven by the monetary speculative value of the artwork. The market operated by overpricing artworks to attract capital in auction houses. Due to the inflationary economic situation, more people invested in artworks as an alternative form of savings. Consequently, there was a rise in the number of transactions and an acceleration of artworks exchange (selling and buying) with the aim of

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272 Ibid.


274 Ibid.
netting a profit. The market, however, was not interested in the ideological aspects of its own activity. This meant that the potential for collecting, understanding, and perpetuating the symbolic value of buyers’ brand-new acquisitions were not foreseen in the maneuvers of the market. People were buying artworks, for a short period of time, with the purpose of decorating their houses. The boom did not last, though, and its effect was the inability to consolidate an internal market for art production in Brazil.

In the international market, the institutionalization of artistic trends manifests via the confrontation of production and the market. In Brazil, however, the market only operates with what is already institutionalized. The agents of the circuit did not invest in production or the promotion of the system of art. In the words of Carlos Zilio, José Resende, Ronaldo Brito, and Waltérico Caldas:

Local production is therefore in a rather paradoxical position: informed and enabled by an institution—art—that rightly or wrongly has roots here, it often spends a considerable amount of time immobilized, waiting for its placement by the market, in a marginal situation so to speak. When the market is ready to rescue it, its time of more effective historic relevance will have passed many times over: it will no longer be information for the present moment; it will have no chance to actively participate in the process of linguistic transformation. As one can see, the market’s time of repossession does not have any level of commitment with the dynamics of linguistic production in the local environment.

This alienation on the part of the market yields consequences in terms of the recognition and historicization of art produced locally. “It is impossible to formalize art history without the effective participation of the market: as a hierarchical conceptualization of successive artistic

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275 Ibid., 184.
276 Ibid., 185.
bids carried out here, as ideological heritage of the dominant classes, there is no Brazilian Art History.”

In the developed countries, the ideological aspects of art history are assumed by the market—beyond the demands for profit. They are thought of as a defense against the incursion of Western culture and patrimony (as detailed by Oliva). This defense would oblige the market to actually insert artworks into the cultural environment—a political function within a dynamic system that seeks obedience and the perpetuation of the ideology of that system. In Brazil, those goals were not met. Thus, “the Brazilian art milieu remains trapped by an enduring circle elitist culture; it does not fit into an industrial culture dynamics like the international circuit does.”

For the Malasartes authors, contemporary production was mainly concerned with the disarticulation of myths around art production. The strategies employed by the contemporary artists were not given precedence over formal or aesthetic procedures; rather they were forced to seek approval from art institutions. In this way, the discussions about art and society—haunting artists since the beginning of the century—became more precise and poignant in the 1970s.

In the final 1976 issue of Malasartes, forty-seven artists signed a manifesto targeting the Salão Arte-Agora and its organizer, Roberto Pontual. Pontual was accused of neutralizing and taming radical artistic propositions, catering to the market, and reproducing the old way of telling art history, which neglected artists’ intentions to break with tradition. And the fact that Pontual

277 Ibid., 186.
278 Ibid., 190.
279 Ana Maria Maiolino, et al., “Manifesto,” Malasartes, 1976. See also: Tadeu Chiarelli, “Uma resenha, mesmo que tardia: Roberto Pontual e a sobrevida da questão da identidade nacional na arte brasileira dos anos 1980,” in ARS vol.8 no. 15 (São Paulo, 2010), 95. Chiarelli states: “It is difficult to know today what were the true motivations that led Pontual to synthesize in such a way the artistic production of that decade, ignoring, or not emphasizing with proper insistence that many of the artists
did not suffer any negative repercussions only affirms the dire state of the Brazilian art world. The solution, if there was one, was pointed out by Brito, Caldas, Resende, and Zilio. They committed not only to producing contemporary artistic languages in local and international circuits, but also to engaging with contemporary readings of those productions.

The authors concluded that contemporary artistic languages and their readings were suffering egregious delays in regards to entering the circulation of the market. Interestingly, this delay generated the post-boom environment of the art market in Brazil. And Meireles used that opportunity to make his series operate as a system, create different kinds of feedback for his work, and continuously reinsert the discussion of ideological circuits into local and international systems of art.

**The Use Value and the Symbolic Value in Art: the Zero Series**

Reflecting on the art market in association with the military in Brazil, Meireles conceptualized two works that he did not complete until 1978: *Zero Cruzeiro* and *Zero Centavo*, 1974–78 (Figures 45 and 47, respectively). These works are related to Meireles’s attention to the public of art. Even if Meireles intended to differentiate the public from consumers in his 1978

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who emerged in that decade took, in fact, a turn, purposely dodging certain postulates of art produced here in the 1960s. But not really, or not only, for the reasons rose by the author. What we see in the production of some of the major artists who gained ground in that period (among them, Waltércio Caldas, José Resende, Anna Bella Geiger, Regina Silveira and others) is that they lacked the gullibility that characterized the generation that preceded it. Informed by international trends of the time (not only in the art field, which gained strength in conceptual aspects, but also in the areas of philosophy and information theory), they were clear that art is not, or should not be just, the arena for expression of subjectivities or emotional and excited protests against the system. It was clear for them that art is a system within a larger system. Thus, any emotional activity or protest—as radical as it seemed—was more likely to be appropriated by the larger system containing it. And they knew, too, that any work of art, to continue within a destabilizing tradition, must be aware of this problem, using it as a springboard. Pontual, however, makes tabula rasa of these issues and, neglecting the more mature contribution of these artists, prefers to see the new generation that was emerging—‘the 80s Generation’—as its antipode.”
interview with Antonio Manuel, his participation in institutional art circuits unquestionably adds value to his artworks. Also, his reflections about the art circuit while in the United States and Brazil—through *Malasartes*, 1975–1976—led him to focus some of his work on the value of art and the speculative value associated with currency (as part of the capitalist system). Similarly, he explored the exchange process intrinsic to art legitimation.

The paradox between the use value and the exchange value of currency persuaded Meireles to include in the art circuit an explicit criticism of the capitalist value system. After the circulation of messages in preexistent modes of economic value (bottles), Meireles presented a second series that used banknotes. This series is named the *Zeros* series and is comprised of four different projects. The first project of the series is the *Zero Cruzeiro*. To make this project Meireles enlisted a friend who was an engraver, João Bosco Renaur, to help with the creation of the objects. Renaur worked in the Central Bank of Brazil, so he was familiar with the nuances of currency and how it functioned in the system. The laborious counterfeiting project generated questions about currency, the exchange value of social representation, and art objects within a museum environment.

The project consisted of a ten-*Cruzeiro* banknote that was converted into a zero-*Cruzeiro* banknote. In the original banknote (Figure 44), there were two images: the front image depicted the last emperor of Brazil, D. Pedro II; and the back image portrayed a sculpture of the Prophet Daniel, made by Aleijadinho (an important Baroque artist in Brazil in the 1800s). Those images were replaced in the fake banknotes by images of an indigenous person on one side of the bill and a madman on the other side. Where the serial number in the banknotes normally appears, Meireles chose to engrave *A00000*. Below that, he wrote his initials and the year that the project was first conceptualized (*CM 1974*) in the upper left corner and the year it was actually made.
(CM 1978) in the bottom right corner. The paper and engraving quality are similar to the official banknotes (Figure 45).

Zero Cruzeiro revealed the symbolic power that maintains a capitalist system as such. Here, it is worth examining the biblical passage in which Jesus says the following to his opponents on the matter of taxation: “Show me a denarius. Whose portrait and inscription are on it?” “Caesar’s,” they replied. He said to them, “Then give to Caesar what is Caesar’s, and to God what is God’s.” In light of this dialogue, one might assume that Meireles’s choice to replace the political and religious personages in the banknote with an indigenous and a catatonic man—and to diminish the banknotes value to zero—references the valuelessness of the people who use the exchange system adopted by virtually any nation-State. The indigenous person in the picture was documented by Meireles’s father, who studied Indian massacres by farmers in Goiás state. And the institutionalized patient picture was taken by Meireles himself during a visit to an asylum.

In Marxist terms, the value of an object depends upon the material used and the amount of work applied to produce it. The extra effort applied to produce an object that is not designed to be used by a worker is considered the source of profit, which is managed by the employer.

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280 (Luke 20:24–26), at www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Luke +20&version=NIV. “The Authority of Jesus Questioned: Paying Taxes to Caesar.” Keeping a close watch on him, they sent spies, who pretended to be sincere. They hoped to catch Jesus in something he said, so that they might hand him over to the power and authority of the governor. So the spies questioned him: “Teacher, we know that you speak and teach what is right, and that you do not show partiality but teach the way of God in accordance with the truth. Is it right for us to pay taxes to Caesar or not?”

He saw through their duplicity and said to them, “Show me a denarius. Whose image and inscription are on it?”

“Caesar’s,” they replied.

He said to them, “Then give back to Caesar what is Caesar’s, and to God what is God’s.”

They were unable to trap him in what he had said there in public. And astonished by his answer, they became silent.
When Meireles combined his work and currency in one object (both functioning as valuative mechanisms), he created an object that emphasized the labor employed to produce it and minimized the value of capital itself. But in doing so, Meireles had to face another problem: the valorization of *Zero Cruzeiro* as artwork.

To avoid the fetishization of a single art object, Meireles made the series an unlimited edition, which means that he could reproduce the objects many times, whenever he chose to do so. This endless reproducibility decreased its value. Ultimately, *Zero Cruzeiro* mimics the circulation of currency to question the validity of money’s symbolic value and to challenge capitalism as a system.

Later, in 1984, Meireles decided to recreate the same project using U.S. dollars. He was responding to the readings of *Zero Cruzeiro* that limited the work’s interpretation to the Brazilian economic situation. *Zero Dollar* (1984), this second iteration of this project employing banknotes, also started from the readymade strategy involving reproducibility and the circulation of art objects. In short, the project took the dollar—symbolic of the system that sustains the geopolitical forces of capitalism—beyond the industrialization of products.

This time, Meireles and Renaur transformed a five-dollar bill into a zero-dollar bill. The original banknote depicts President Lincoln on the front of the bill and the Lincoln Memorial on the other side. Meireles substituted Lincoln with Uncle Sam and the Lincoln Memorial with Fort Knox. The replacements associated political leadership with financial investments in wars and American historical buildings with militarized economic power (Figure 49).

Uncle Sam personifies America, and the most famous version of the image was displayed on the war recruitment poster made by J.M. Flagg in 1917. Meireles used this version of the
character—Uncle Sam pointing at the viewer in an authoritarian fashion—in his banknotes. Meireles did not, however, include the poster’s original message: “I want YOU for U.S. Army.” The features of the counterfeit Uncle Sam are also slightly different from Flagg’s creation. Regardless, Uncle Sam appears in Meireles’s banknotes as a surrogate for all American authorities in this iconic image of American ideology.

Fort Knox—officially called the United States Bullion Depository—is a fortified vault secured by the military in Kentucky. There, all U.S. national gold reserves are held. By 1945, the U.S. had accumulated the majority of the world’s gold reserves by trading supplies to European countries. The United States had become the most productive economy in the world, and the U.S. dollar was converted to the gold standard in the international market.  

*Zero Dollar* provided commentary on the fetishization of currency and its inherently unstable value. This instability of the U.S. dollar was felt especially strongly after America’s massive expenditure on the Vietnam War. The resulting pressure concerning the currency propagated the events that followed American international policies under Nixon’s administration to recuperate the currency’s circulation.

By 1971, Nixon signed an agreement with the leader of the Organization of Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC). In this agreement with Saudi Arabia, the United States established the dollar as the only currency accepted in exchange for oil. This fact guaranteed the demand for U.S. dollars on a worldwide scale. It guaranteed the circulation of dollars—or petrodollars—and associated the currency with the consumption of the most important source of energy in the twentieth century.

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Yet in 1971, the Bretton Woods agreement, which created a parallel between dollars and gold among the United States and its allies in 1944, was broken. Nixon withdrew the dollar-to-gold equivalence, which meant that the currency was not backed up by gold. Consequently, the amount of dollars circulating in the world had no correspondence to the gold available to pay back the value of that currency. At that time, “new financial instruments, new speculative tools, proliferated. The world gravitated from the certainties of Bretton Woods to the dizzying market cycles we’ve lived with since.”

Meireles explored this speculative potential of the financial system—he established Zero Dollar as an unlimited edition, referencing the circulation of currency and artistic production. This critique appeared when the art market was growing in Brazil and in the midst of a growing multinational capitalism. This work is also related to the problem of provincialism in two senses: as Meireles questioning the hegemonic power of American economy and as “self-conscious art obsessed with the problem of” inserting itself in the New York art circuit.

A preoccupation with the value of art in a capitalist society as well as with the complicities between artists and the institutional art world in New York was already debated in an indirect manner by pop artists and in an explicit manner by conceptual practices. One particular flyer of the collective of artists, Art Workers Coalition (AWC), reveals the issues artists were debating at that time.

According to Julia Bryan-Wilson, the AWC applied for a grant through the Rockefeller Brothers Foundation and the New York State Council of the Arts in 1969. The AWC won the

grant, but they decided not to use the money due to its corporate origin and Rockefeller’s pro-war views. They decided instead to create a flyer, One Blood Dollar (c.1970), which was a photocopied one-dollar bill that bore inscriptions on it targeting MoMA’s policies (Figure 46).

As Bryan-Wilson points out, the dilemmas faced by this generation of artists were pervasive. On one hand, the money could help the artists establish a community cultural center in black and Spanish-speaking neighborhoods in New York; but on the other hand, the money would not effectively restructure the elitist and exclusionary practices developed at MoMA and other museums. Thus, no simple solution existed for the AWC.

The text and image in One Blood Dollar combined the hand-drawn portrait of Rockefeller and the following title: “The United States Art World.” Smaller text states, “Pay to the artist only as long as he behaves himself,” “Not valid for black, Puerto Rican or female artists,” and “Pay to the artist only as long as he has the shows the right attitude.” The fake bill is signed by two other targets of the protest: the Metropolitan curator, Henry Geldzaher, and a MoMA trustee, William S. James. The flyer clearly depicts the art world as a powerful and restrictive system in which just a few artists are allowed to exhibit—and even those who meet the prerequisites have to conform to the rules at play.

The combination of text and image in One Blood Dollar (and in Meireles’s counterfeit bills) met Liz Kotz’s criterion for conceptual art—but with some distinctions. Kotz describes transitional artists (coming from minimalist and phenomenological approaches) who combine words with photographs to form their documentation process. Both words and photography were considered neutral systems devoid of ideological, representational, or emotional charge. Words

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284 Bryan-Wilson, Art Workers, 21.
285 Ibid., 22.
on the counterfeit bills provide captions for the images, and they represent the return of the repressed—that is, the reappearance of the language and image pairing present since the advent of the illustrated press. (Actually, this paring was withdrawn in modernist photography).

In *One Blood Bill*, words inform the passersby about the issues at stake for the protesters. And in *Zero Cruzeiro* and *Zero Dollar*, words induce a semiotic analysis of currency in terms of its descriptive and symbolic value. The photographs used by Meireles in *Zero Cruzeiro* add an informational aspect to the aesthetic of anthropological documentation. The works parallel the position of government officials who seek to control the politics of representation and language. In the English coin version of the *Zero* series, *Zero Cent* (1990), Meireles substituted the George Washington profile of the original coin with a Coca-Cola bottle (Figure 48), which represents another form of feedback to the *Insertions* series. On the other side of the coin, the artist kept the United States seal but changed the value from twenty-five cents to “zero cent.”

The banknotes were precisely counterfeited to look like real banknotes. To Meireles, the legacy of Duchamp did not bemoan craftsmanship; rather, it lamented the repetition implicit in any manual labor that became predictable.  

For that reason, Meireles believed that each of his ideas required a particular aesthetic resolution. Thus, there is a wide range of different aesthetic and conceptual resolutions in the artworks he produced throughout his career—from industrialized objects to counterfeit banknotes.

Despite the fact that the works consist of text and image, the words appear neither as a productive instruction nor a performative score. They appear more as an image caption, and in a less evident manner, as a statement of authenticity. This is crucial because reading the bills does

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not implicate the audience’s feedback in the system of circulation triggered by Meireles. The
general proposition—and the different realizations—are dependent mostly on Meireles’s
insertion of new bills into the circulation and into the curatorial frameworks in which the bills are
exhibited. This means that the distribution system of these bills is at the core of this work.

It’s worth noting that the more bills Meireles distributes, hypothetically, the less value
they have in the marketplace. In contrast to this logic, a certain amount of circulation into the art
world is necessary for the artwork to increase in value. As Anne Cauquelin has argued, the
system of art operates like a network within which artworks are known as many times they are
mentioned in the network.\(^{287}\) She believes that communication plays a major role in defining the
field of contemporary art, which keeps itself going through its complex network of agents.
Artists and artworks enter consciousness and elicit debate once they circulate in Web sites,
publications, and institutional programs such as exhibitions and lectures. And because the art
network is a global and nonhierarchical system of information in which contemporary art is
produced, sold, collected, and disseminated, there is no clear entrance into or exit out of the art
world. The operations inside the network do not depend on an individual artist’s will. Thus, even
though Meireles attempted to create an alternative circulation system for his \textit{Zero Dollar} and
\textit{Zero Cruzeiro} bills, he may have unwittingly increased the demand for them by collectors and
exhibitors.

This sixth chapter has presented \textit{Malasartes} magazine an important initiative of its
editors to improve the debate about contemporary art in Brazil. The editors had to face, and
failed to overcome, the demands of capital in terms of the circulation of the magazine. The

\(^{287}\) Cauquelin, \textit{Arte Contemporânea}.  
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ineffectiveness of the art circuit in Brazil was this time the target of Meireles’s artistic practice. As mentioned, his Zeros series institutes an alternative circuitry for his work. He reproduces and distributes worldwide the bills and coins in an attempt to draw attention to the speculative value of money and art. This intertwining relation between the Insertions series and the capitalist system is an inescapable feature of the series, which is recapitulated in the conclusion of this dissertation. In the conclusion this complicity is not rejected, rather is taken as a compelling way to criticize the system of art and the capitalist system.
CONCLUSION

Throughout Meireles’s career, the *Insertions* series has remained a part of his production, but his understanding and use of it has undergone inventive changes. As this study demonstrated, these changes are reflected in the way the artist writes about the *Insertions* and the manner in which he presents the *Insertions* of both his own works and also those of others in exhibitions, catalogues, and interviews. In particular, he has been concerned with the insertion of “information and critical opinions,” which have distinct and textual contours. As we saw, the use of industrial icons and currency as part of the artwork’s context or its title is an important consideration to Meireles. Consequently, the use of these materials and the artist’s statements shape the series as an open and complex system. In its complexity, the series dialogues with the systems of art and the capitalist system.

Also, this study has argued that Meireles has become concerned with more inventive forms of information, such as rumors or noise in the interpretative relationship among artist, work, and viewer—as well as between general and specialized audiences of curators, critics, and art historians. Through a detailed analysis of Meireles’s objects and their circuitry, this study has assessed the artist’s various approaches to opposing capitalist ideology. Whereas his early works, *Insertions into Ideological Circuits* and *Insertions into Anthropological Circuits* embodied a destructive, anticapitalist impulse, his projects of the late 1970s and the recent versions of the series acquired by Tate Modern are marked by what Meireles has called the “post-ideological” conditions of the moment. In 1986, Meireles stated the following:

> Instead of rebellion, what there is today is honest cynicism in relation to capitalist society and the worth of the individual. This is quite clear in art. Art opens up the doors of perception, but does not lead to greater awareness as previously believed. It is seen as an
investment and that’s it, which can be good to encourage some artistic individualities… Individualism as an ideological position is being raised by the younger generations. We are living in a post-ideology period.288

In other words, the artist reconsiders the revolutionary role of his art in a global society—that it is supported and constrained by capital investments in single artists. Years later, Meireles confirmed the slackening of his anticapitalist critique by declaring in an interview with Cristina Tejo (published in the Diário de Pernambuco on January 6, 2002) that the capitalist ideology, albeit not ideal, was the only one that stimulated the most recent artistic production. Whereas prior, failed artistic movements—such as Russian Constructivism—had been State sponsored, the model that most “enabled the advancement of the arts in the twentieth century was capitalism, with little or no State interference. In theory, the State has other priorities to address (education and culture would be left to the initiative of private capital).”289 With this statement, Meireles indicates the interweaving of private capital with the promotion of art, and he inserts himself as a forerunner of a different perception of culture. From this perspective, the artist is a producer who embraces all the contradictions that this position entails. After all, his works are part of the capitalist system that he sometimes criticizes. The ambivalence of his critique is arguably due to the shifting size, scope, and function of the contemporary art world.


289 Scovino, ed., Cildo Meireles, 190. The artist answered a question about the role of institutions and the state in art by saying, “The beginning of the twentieth century marked major changes in the visual arts. At the beginning of last century, the crème de la crème of art was in Russia. It was the time of Suprematism and Constructivism. But the Russian project and its model, which was State-sponsored, proved to be a mistake, and lapsed into poor art. The model that enabled the advancement of the arts in the twentieth century was capitalism, with little or no State interference. In theory, the state has other priorities to address (education and culture would be left to the initiative of private capital), which does not mean that the private sector would be ideal. The ideal model has yet to emerge. In Brazil, the economic elite is not interested. Few people spend money on art. It’s no surprise that culture is linked to what is most outdated. Cases like Marcantonio Vilaça are extremely rare.”
This study also aimed to demonstrate that in consequence to the expansion of the art world, Meireles’s anxiety about the readings of the *Insertions* series leads him to search for specific versions in each of the projects in the series and to try to influence the feedback. However, Meireles also uses this strategy to avoid the total attenuation of his critique. After all, the risk of irrelevance rises dramatically once an artwork is absorbed by the art institutions and rarely provokes any action from the public due to overexposure and dominant readings.290

As previously mentioned, Okwui Enwezor suggested that the current display of the *Insertions* series could entail a fetishization of the 1960s via the curatorial and historical projects proposed by the museum. Enwezor thought that it would be more in sync with Meireles’s intentions if the Coca-Cola bottles were imprinted and circulated around London for Meireles’s 2008 solo exhibition. Enwezor deemed such a strategy preferable to displaying works that no longer produced any social engagement beyond the museum’s walls.

What Enwezor missed in his observation, however, is that this very suggestion provides a contextual response to the general proposition put forth by *Insertions*. In other words, it further acts as a kind of feedback. Indeed, Meireles might approve of the fact that the Tate Modern’s curatorial team did not pursue that option. Better still; the idea may have never even occurred to the curatorial staff. Of course, this does not mean that an event of that nature could not occur—that another museum could not come up with such an idea—because the feedback element of the series always allows for such possibilities.

Ultimately, though, Meireles’s *Insertions* could not and should not escape the uses of the capitalist system: the series is subjected to endless reproductions in books and exhibitions, and it

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290 Cauquelin, *Arte Contemporânea*, 84. See also Figure 55 in the appendix.
was decontextualized since its first appearance in publications. After a while, *Insertions* simply
could not be reduced to the context in which it was created and publicly received. Actually, its
many appearances in different contexts allude to a fissure in the dominant narrative about the
series as an “ideological conceptualist” proposal—and to the idea that the narratives around the
artwork can be disrupted at any moment, even if eventually the many narratives about the series
overlap and entangle in each other.

For instance, the feedbacks after 1973 were, at first, injected into the art world by
Meireles’s documentation of the series. Some images of silk screening being applied in the
bottles were recorded for Wilson Coutinho’s 1979 movie about Meireles. The images in the film
(and some photographs taken during the late 70s and early 80s) were implanted into the art
circuit with the hope of eliciting public participation. The photographs were taken for
instructional purposes: language structures are delineated and the audience learns how to
replicate counterfeit tokens or how to apply sentences onto bottles via silk screen. Starting in the
late 1980s, Meireles focused on currency as the medium and system for the *Insertions* series
because he realized that banknotes were less susceptible to centralized mechanisms of control.
The postal system, radio productions, cinematic creations, and press are easily controlled, but as
he stated, censoring the circulation of currency would “eliminate the base of the monetary
system of a nation.”

Thus, a recontextualization of the project is possible due to the structure of the series,
which is capable of assimilating the feedback it receives. In other words, the *Insertions* series is
implicated in a reconciliation with and deflagration of the capitalist system. As Meireles
291 Cildo Meireles’s statement made in 1978 to Antonio Manuel’s project *Ondas do Corpo* [Body
Waves]. Reprinted at Scovino, *Cildo Meireles*, 64.
mentioned, the series grows with time, which we can see in the different versions of the
banknotes created for different countries (Brazil, the United States, Costa Rica and Germany).
For more evidence, we can observe the different currency designs that he created during Brazil’s
high-inflation years (Figure 49).

In the end, the *Insertions* series did not attempt a revolutionary critique, one that sought
the elimination of the capitalist system. Maybe it was an imagined reality by Meireles, a situation
untenable within his artistic practice. The role of the artist inherited by Meireles presupposes his
individual position as an initiator of actions. He does not speak for a nation—as he said—and he
is not affiliated with any political parties. Similarly, he did not participate in student movements
or in the Centro de Cultura Popular in Brazil (as Ferreira Gullar and many others art critics did).
Instead, Meireles’s operations were targeting the art world as such.

Years after the first appearance of the *Insertions* series, Meireles attempted to elucidate
the artistic strategy he had initially employed. He begins the list with what became his own
practice as an artist: “1 Insertions into circuits.” This first item seems to indicate Meireles’s
concerns about how he could insert his work into the artistic circuits of the time—and his self-
awareness that any circuit is bound by an ideological system.

Meireles’s movement against anesthesia would only be possible if he established certain
narratives around the series. And Meireles’s pledge to avoid “translated interpretations that cease
to have any importance when interpretations are no longer made like works”\(^{292}\) manifested itself
through the combined and flexible assimilation of different discourses of the art world workers
(curators, art historians, critics). His own open-ended proposition for the *Insertions* series—

which enabled his work to become a discursive and multi-temporal project—also contributed to his aim.

In his most recent version of the Insertions series text (1999), Meireles extrapolates his first reflections upon the legacy of Marcel Duchamp and the possible obscuration in straightforward interpretations with which conceptual artists were framing the significance of Duchamp’s ideas. In his earlier 1970’s version, revised and published in 1999, Meireles described “insertions” as a scientific approach to the study of phenomena in which science has to adopt the same viewpoint as that of the phenomena. In this description, Meireles’s analogy contains a cybernetic analysis of a system. The scientist or the artist has to integrate with the phenomenon which he or she is investigating to assimilate its modus operandi in order to fully grasp its occurrence. In Meireles own words:

[... ] Insertions
Science devotes itself to the study of static phases of phenomena. With this knowledge it seeks to categorize and determine these phenomena. However, science can only begin to understand these phenomena fully by coming face-to-face with them – adopting the same viewpoint as the phenomena themselves. To explain by analogy: We can learn virtually nothing about a film if the only knowledge we have of it is random, isolated, individual frames.
In the action of ‘insertion’ it is velocity that specifically interests me. Here it is a matter of verifying the actual speed of the process [...] 293

Meireles suggested in his writings that Insertions is a way to interact with the system one is planning to address. Also, he suggests that circuits are the codes and historical references of a closed system within which a system of references stops to make sense when it is no longer capable of producing more works, artworks, or debates about the artworks. For that reason, he was interested in the speed which could disturb the process observed, particularly because the

293 Herkenhoff, et al., Cildo Meireles, 135.
emerging Brazilian art market perpetuated a system of exploitation and pressured artists to maintain reactionary viewpoints about art. He feared that the market would arrest new debates about art and its social function. Although Meireles’s ideas touched upon issues of the art market in the Brazilian context, his writings indicate a broader interpretation of the term ‘circuit’ and indicated the idea of system as a medium. Meireles thought about the ideological aspects of systems and cybernetics when he theorized about the ideological circuits. His emphasis on the social aspects of systems is evident in his call to “replace the notion of a market with that of the public,” get rid of “passive, closet intellectualism,” and gain visibility through extra-artistic channels like magazines, radio, television, consumer products, and coins. Thus, the *Insertions* were understood as an operation between systems: the system of art and the capitalist system, making both mediums through which the artist could present a critique or propose an action. The *Banknote Project* and the *Coca-Cola Project* were therefore not simply modes of circulating art in alternative spaces but also feedback of the art world in terms of the work’s reference to the readymade, pop art, and concrete and neoconcrete art. In other words, Meireles inverted Marcel Duchamp’s readymade by placing the “purposelessness” of the artwork in the circuitry of merchandise and reinserted pop art’s appropriation of mass communication back into the circuitry of its sources. In terms of concrete art, it sought to intervene in the public sphere, but to do so through anticapitalist ideological design, and thereby extend neoconcretism’s political participatory impulse. In each of these layers, the *Insertions* series made reference to the system as a medium, meaning that these projects were not only products of the art world, but operated as a system inside the art world as much as it (theoretically) operated outside of it.

The efficiency of the system of art as a perpetrator of interest about the *Insertions* series can be confirmed through the analysis of the publication of the *Black Comb* project in a
Brazilian-based journal in 2002. *Item–5 Art Magazine* dedicated the entire issue to African-American concerns and expressions. The issue featured numerous articles about African heritage in South America including the contributions of art historians, sociologists, anthropologists, and film critics. The magazine contained two sets of art images selected by the editors, Eduardo Coimbra and Ricardo Basbaum. In one set, there was a two-page spread that presented white text on a black background and a pick on a white background on the other page (Figure 54). This spread represented the return of the *Black Comb* in the system of art. The text, written by the American artist Glenn Ligon, appears as follows:

Dear Readers,

Please answer the following question:

If you were black, what kind of hairstyle would you have?

Send your answer along [with] a photograph to:

Glenn Ligon
526 West 26th Street, Room 616
New York, New York 10001
U.S.A.

Thank You

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In a text message to the author on June 17, 2013, Ricardo Basbaum clarifies the idea for the project as follows: “Glenn Ligon made this work especially for the *Item-5*. I have no precise memory, but I believe it was at the suggestion of Paulo Herkenhoff. If I’m not mistaken, I met with Ligon in New York and he handed me the envelope with his proposal. It was our mistake not to have placed the image credits in relation to this work—we were more concerned about indicating the sources of images previously published.

The choice of images for the two publications was guided by the Afro-American issue (of both South and North Americas). In the specific case that you refer to, the link between the two works is quite self-evident and does not require further comments. It seemed interesting to bring together two artists with such distinct backgrounds, and also to place side by side works that employ conceptual strategies in such a different way.”
Ligon’s query invites one to ponder identity and representation. There is also an empathetic element to the question—one wonders what it might be like to put oneself in the place of another. In general, it is a recollection of the sort of ethnic affirmation that developed in the 1970s and circulated in social systems (as envisioned by Meireles forty years in the past). The text signifies an important inversion: an American artist’s message has been inserted by the magazine editors into the Brazilian art circuit. The message was written in English, but the magazine was mainly circulated in Brazil. Despite the fact that the English words would likely be understood by readers of the magazine in Brazil, the message was not answered—perhaps due to the magazine’s poor circulation. The address presented is that of Ligon’s gallery in New York. In a text message to this author on May 17, 2013, Caroline Burghardt, director of publications and archives at Luhring Augustine Buswick Gallery, confirmed that the gallery did not receive any responses from readers. Moreover, she mentioned that Ligon had only a foggy memory of the work. Indeed, these results are not terribly surprising considering the slow and inefficient manner that the work was injected into the Brazilian art circuit. Basically, the work could not keep up with the rhythm of the market in the developed countries.\textsuperscript{295}

Ligon’s work was constructed as an inquiry that allowed readers to provide feedback in a conventional manner through the postal system. Because the magazine was not widely circulated and the \textit{Black Comb} project had little historical precedence, one might understandably fail to make the connection between Ligon’s insertion and Meireles’s \textit{Insertions} series. Regardless, when \textit{Black Comb} (1971–73) and \textit{Project Design} (1998) were placed together by Basbaum and Coimbra, they produced a feedback to \textit{Insertions into Anthropological Circuits}. Like Duchamp’s \textit{Comb} in 1938, Meireles’s \textit{Black Comb} message has been recirculated in the systems of art—

\textsuperscript{295} Carlos Zilio, et al, “O Boom, o Pós-Boom e o Dis-Boom”.

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though not as an object or a sketch that Meireles hoped to introduce to the public. Given Basbaum and Coimbra’s presentation of the work, language and image were combined to recontextualize the *Black Comb* through its association with Ligon’s correspondence system. In that way, Meireles’s project was resignified due to its engagement with Ligon’s message.

In this example of the *Insertions* series feedback, there is a blatant lack of collective engagement with the artistic propositions as evidenced by the lack of response. Thus, the circulation within the institutional (albeit deficient) art circuit in Brazil has been kept to a bare minimum. And yet, paradoxically, this reality reinforces the notion that the system of art is more effective at being a system than its audience is. In the system of art, the feedback is organized to approximate its visibility, but a broader audience has no systematic or organized interest in inserting information into the art world.

This dissertation also asserts that the works operated only hypothetically outside the art world because Meireles left hints that his work has been a farce, a form of camouflage, since the beginning. In interviews with both Hans-Ulrich Obrist and myself, Meireles avoided answering questions about the precise number of messages inscribed throughout the history of the *Insertions* series by telling a story about a recent art historical discovery relating to Duchamp’s *Fountain* (1917). According to Meireles, an American researcher decided to investigate Duchamp’s works in a new light by investigating the factory from which Duchamp

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297 Oliveira, Cildo Meireles, interview with the author. A list with the following questions were also sent to Meireles and two of his assistants, who had answered previous questions, but for no reason never answered these: […] Were 1,000 bottles really made? Were they all distributed in Rio de Janeiro? Which year did Meireles return to produce them, was it in 1973? Were they made over the years, from when to when? How many messages were made?
appropriated the object to create his proposition. She could not find any evidence of Fountain's original design or any documentation indicating that the factory had produced that object at the time. Her research led her to a suitcase with detailed plans of the readymade, and that made her question the legitimacy of the claim that Duchamp’s works were prefabricated. Meireles believes that the Insertions series has a lot in common with that story: Insertions began as a small-scale production (the two etched and empty Coca-Cola bottles and the two banknotes at MoMA) that progressed to “a system in bigger scale. Howsoever, the found suitcase and the readymade plans story is a true artwork.” With this statement, Meireles is simultaneously asserting that all interpretations of his work have been based on suppositions and that his own work is a supposition of the routes, versions, and feedback inherent to the Insertions series—all of which combine to create “a true artwork.”

Therefore, the contribution of this study is to offer a model that encompasses mutation with the passing of time, which would make it possible to analyze the variety of categorizations that the Insertions series had been acquiring through time. In this sense, the theorization about feedback is crucial to this dissertation. As we have seen, feedback can be produced by an artist as a response to his/her own work and by the public. This model of art as a system, which Meireles proposed in his artistic practice, would be generative of questions to contemporary artists. According to Mark Godfrey in his essay about Meireles, “Playing the System,” the strategy of insertion has been used by younger artists such as Carey Young, Omer Fast and Alessandro Ludovico, all of whom tamper objects in pre-existent systems of distribution of merchandise and

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298 Scovino, Cildo Meireles, 174.
299 Ibid.
information.\textsuperscript{300} Even if Meireles’s work were not known by these young artists at the time they produced their insertions, Godfrey’s argument is that many artists since the 1960s sought to create alternative ways of displaying their work and even to corrupt the existing spaces of art exhibition. When Meireles conceptualized his work as an insertion into ideological circuits, he was trying to understand a problem that was haunting the minds of many artists in the 1970s. According to Walter Benjamin, in his essay, “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction,”\textsuperscript{301} art had entered in the stage of exhibition value when art is no longer evaluated and produced because of its potential for social ritual; the main goal of the artist in this informational age is to have one’s artwork displayed. The exhibition value implicates spaces within which the art can be seen and recognized as such. These spaces are managed by art agents who select, group, and interpret the artworks through exhibitions. Thus, creating alternative circuits to display artworks or propositions became a fundamental practice for artists like Meireles. However, this study could not devote time to delve into charting the types of alternative spaces that sprung up during the 1970s. It only offers the beginning of this investigation on the politics of display.

This dissertation concludes upon the theoretical and historical analysis elaborated here that the \textit{Insertions} series can be newly comprehended through the framework of systems. It demonstrated crucial characteristics of the series such as the feedback and the recirculation of the objects in the art world, which were ignored by the current interpretations of the series. I affirm that the \textit{Insertions} series is an ongoing project using systems as the proposed medium which is

\textsuperscript{300} Mark Godfrey, “Playing the System,” \textit{Tate Etc.} issue 14 (Autumn 2008), available at www.tate.org.uk/context-comment/articles/playing-system

also the focus of Meireles’s critique. In a paradoxical way, while art and capitalist systems evolve and change, the *Insertions* series also advances and metamorphoses. Finally, this study seeks to add to the art historical scholarship on the Meireles’s series by considering the feedback and the recirculation of the *Insertions* series as paramount to understand and analyze its legacy. It is hoped that this study will expand the understanding of the *Insertions* series further than the decade during which it was conceptualized, and will provide more understanding of the operations of the series—an art project that continuously resuscitates interest in its various audiences throughout time.
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*Versions and Inversions: Perspectives on Avant-Garde In Latin America.* Edited by Hector Olea and Mari Carmen Ramírez; [with contributions by Peter C. Marzio ... [et al.]]. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2006.


These questions are and your answers will be part of Hans Haacke’s VISITORS’ PROFILE a work in progress during the Haacke exhibition at the Guggenheim Museum.

Please fill out the questionnaire and drop into the box on the white round table near the windows on the Museum’s ground floor. Do not sign your name.

1. Do you have a professional interest in art, e.g., artist, student, critic, historian, etc?  yes  no
2. Is the use of the American flag for the expression of political beliefs, e.g., on lap-hats and in[illegible] art exhibitions a legitimate exercise of free speech?  yes  no
3. How old are you?  years
4. Should the use of marijuana be legalized, slightly or severely punished?  too
5. What is your marital status?  married  single  divorced  separated  widowed
6. Do you sympathize with Women’s Lib?  yes  no
7. Are you male, female?  male  female
8. Do you have children?  yes  no
9. Would you mind having your child to integrate schools?  yes  no
10. What is your ethnic background?  yes  no
11. Assuming you were Indochinese, would you sympathize with the present Saigon regime?  yes  no
12. In your opinion is the moral fabric of this country strengthened or weakened by the US involvement in Indochina?  strengthened  weakened
13. What is your religion?  yes  no
14. Do you think the interests of profit-oriented business usually are compatible with the common good of the world?  yes  no
15. What is your annual income (before taxes)?  yes  no
16. In your opinion are the economic difficulties of the US mainly attributable to the Nixon Administration’s policies?  yes  no
17. Where do you live?  city  county  state
18. Do you think the defeat of the SST was a step in the right direction?  yes  no
19. Are you enrolled in or have you graduated from college?  yes  no
20. In your opinion should the general orientation of the country be more or less conservative?  more  less

Your answers will be tabulated later today together with the answers of all other visitors of the exhibition. Thank you.

Edgardo Vigo

TNT

Invitado por Jorge Glusberg, director del GAC a participar en una sala de la bienal sin aspiración a premios y con el deseo de mostrar al pueblo brasileño nuestro trabajo, aceptó la idea. Posteriormente el citado J.G. renunció al cargo de los trabajos (posición personal) era... en mi quedó la desilusión de no poder expresar mi resonancia contra la bienal de un pueblo, cualquiera sea su posibilidad por más que esto no se arregla más con permanentes sino con ACCIONES DIRECTAS, como el uso de la arte señalado.

Edgardo Vigo

Figure 7. Edgardo Vigo, in Contrabienal, 1971. Source: image and synopsis provided by the International Center for the Arts of the Americas at the Museum of the Fine Arts, Houston. 302

considers only by means of mere thoughts the situation unsolvable. Instead, it requires “direct actions” through the use of trinitrotoluene, referring to the letters heading his reply.”


Translation: STUDY FOR TIME. a study for duration: (with optical means: sand, wind….). choose a place and make a hole in the sand, with your hands. sit down close by, pay attention; concentrate on the hole, until the wind fills it again, completely. [sic]

Translation: A STUDY FOR SPACE/TIME. study for duration-area, through “cold water, fasting”, big silver or aluminum pot. Observe pure water fast for twelve hours. After this time, drink half liter of water and pour it into a big aluminum or silver pot then drink water, slowly. [sic]

Translation: A STUDY FOR SPACE. study for area: by acoustic means (sounds). choose a place (city or countryside), stop and concentrate attentively on the sounds that you hear, from the closest to the distant ones. [sic]
Figure 16. Cildo Meireles, Illustration Receipt, February 2, 1970. Source: Cildo Meireles’s studio archives.

Flairplay, Issue 36 (February, 1970). Translation of the editor’s note on the bottom page: “The simple publication of this receipt is exactly the work or the artwork of Cildo Meireles. He did not hand in a work in the sense in which a work is understood by everybody. He sold us an idea, or an emotion, or a state of being. Truly, he establishes here another way of relation. Cildo is in his own…” [sic].
This was the version presented at INFORMATION.

This was a later English version of the project.

Figure 18. The two versions of Coca-Cola Project.

Translation: Place where the work was made and where one can find the third box buried.
Figure 28. Installation view of Coca-Cola Project and Banknote Project at INFORMATION. Source: MoMA Exh. #934, July 2-September 20, 1970. Available at MAID (the Museum Archives Image Database, MoMA—NY.)
Figure 29. The Coca-Cola bottles are empty. Source: MoMA Exh. #934, July 2 - September 20, 1970. Available at MAID (the Museum Archives Image Database, MoMA—NY.)
Figure 30. Frederico Morais, *A Nova Crítica* [The New Critique], 1970. Slide by Morais. Source: Frederico Morais’s archives.
Figure 32. Antonio Manuel, *Isso É Que É* [This Is It], 1970. Flan from newspaper, 68x 51 cm. Frederico Morais’s Collection. Source: Glória Ferreira, ed. *Anos 70: Arte como Questão/Art as Question the 1970s* (São Paulo: Instituto Tomie Ohtake, 2009), 75.
This undated message was part of an ongoing practice of Morais in his strategy to reinvent the work of art criticism in Rio de Janeiro during the 1970s.
Figure 40. Cildo Meireles, *Insertions into Ideological Circuit: Yankees Go Home, Molotov and Which is the Place of Art?* Catalogued by Tate Modern in 2008. Source: www.tate.org.uk/art/artists/cildo-meireles-6633.

This was the first published description of the Insertions series. Note that instructions in the Banknote Project were stamped in Costa Rican currency.
Figure 45. The original ten-Cruzeiro banknote.

Figure 51. Cildo Meireles and Gabriel Borba, *Propuestas No Tradicionales*, 1978. Source: *Artes Visuales*, no. 18. (Mexico: Museo de Arte Moderno del Instituto Nacional de Bellas Artes, Verano 1978). This material is part of an anthology of conceptual works organized and published by Juan Acha. Cildo Meireles’s studio archives.

APPENDIX

Figure A.1. Anne Cauquelin, Schema 1 refers to the operations of the modern art as a specific circuit in a society where the agents were distinguishable. Schema 2 refers to contemporary art inside a communication society where the agents of art legitimation are divided into two groups: producers as agents of communication and consumers.

The chronologically ordered texts produced by Meireles in publications mentioned in this dissertation:

Figure A.3. The first publication of the text “Insertions into Ideological Circuits.” Source: Cildo Meireles, “Quem Se Desloca Recebe, Quem Pede Tem Preferência (Gentil Cardoso),” Malasartes, No. 01 (Rio de Janeiro, 1975), 15.
“Inserções em circuitos ideológicos”

When it came to defining the philosophy of his work, M. Duchamp affirmed that, between other things, his main objective was to liberate “Art as the domain of the hand,” certainly not imagining that we would arrive in 1970. O que a primeira vista podia ser facilmente localizado e efetivamente combatido, tende hoje a localizar-se numa área de difícil acesso e apreensão: o cérebro.

It is evident that Duchamp’s metaphor is an example, today, of a learnt experience. More than anything else, Duchamp’s fight was against the traditional manual practices, which led to increased skill and abilities of the hands, and along with it, a gradual entrenchment of emotional, rational, and psychological content, which was mechanized and habitualized, fundamentally provoking an individual. O fato de não ter as mãos sujas de Arte nada significa além do que as mãos estão limpas.

Much more than the manifestations of a phenomenon, Duchamp’s fight was against the logic of this phenomenon. The fact that we are alive today, and have learned from our experience, is a great relief and a certain pleasure in not using our hands. Como se as coisas estivessem, até que enfim, O.K. Como se nesse exato momento, a gente não precisasse iniciar a luta contra um adversário bem mais: a habitualidade e o artesanato cerebral.

The style, the hands, the mind (the raciocínio), is an anomaly. An anomaly, a more intelligent act of the hand, is the result of this.

**ARTE - CULTURA**

Se a interferência de M. Duchamp foi ao nível da Arte (lógica do fenômeno), vale dizer da estética, e se por isso preconizava a libertação da habitualidade de domínio das mãos, é bom que se diga que qualquer interferência nesse campo hoje (a colocação de Duchamp teve o grande mérito de forçar a percepção da Arte não mais como percepção de objetos artísticos mas como um fenômeno do pensamento), uma vez que o que se faz hoje tende a estar mais próximo da cultura do que da Arte, é necessariamente uma interferência política. Porque se a Estética fundamenta a Arte, é a Política que fundamenta a Cultura.

Cildo Meireles, abril de 1970

Text from the original article “Perspectivas para uma Arte Brasileira,” do which participated, among others, Mário Pedrosa, Federico Moraes, Jorge Romeno Brist, Carlos Vergara, Ramundo Coelho.

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**Figure A.4.** The second publication of the text “Insertions into Ideological Circuits.” Source: Ronaldo Brito and Eudoro A. M. de Sousa, *Cildo Meireles* (Rio de Janeiro: FUNARTE, 1981), 22.
Between 1968 and 1970 I was beginning to touch on something interesting. I was no longer working with metaphorical representations of situations. I was working with the real situation itself. Furthermore, the kind of work I was making had what could be described as a "collective" form. It was no longer referred to in the middle of the beast, or the shape. It existed in a sense of what it could speak to the body of society. This was what one had in one's head at that time: the necessity to work with the idea of the public. Many Brazilian artists were including everyday events and actions in their work, directing this work towards a large, indeterminate number of people, who is called the public.

Today there is the danger of making work known precisely who will be interested in it. The idea of the public, which is broad, generous notice, has been replaced, through a process of commercialization, by the idea of the consumer. That section of the public which has acquisition power. The Insertions into Ideological Circuits are out of the need to create a system for the circulation and exchange of information that did not depend on any kind of centrally effective control. This would be a kind of anarchy, a system according to the media of steam, radio and television—typical examples of media that actually reach an enormous audience, but in the circulation system of which there is always a certain degree of central and overview of the information inserted. In other words, in these media the "insertion" is performed by an idea that has access to the levels on which the system is developed—technological sophistication involving huge amounts of money and/or power.

The Insertions into Ideological Circuits took shape as two projects: the Joyeux Ouvrier Project and the Cédula Project, both in 1968. The work began with a text written in April 1969 which sets out this position:

1. There are certain mechanisms for circulation (circuits).
2. These circuits are not always the ideology of the producer, but at the same time they are passive when they receive insertions into their circuits.
3. This occurs whenever people initiate circuits.

The Insertions into Ideological Circuits also arise from the recognition of the ability to create new practices, new situations, letters, events, texts, signs, mass media, objects, social situations, which in turn allow the site of the writing of the text, the circulation of information, the politics of the world, in the use of paper, the economy, metaphysically, in the returnable container (self-disposable bottles, for example).

But clearly, the important thing in the project was the introduction of the concept of

Figure A.5. Cildo Meireles, new feedback of the first "Insertions" text. Published at Paulo Herkenhoff, Gerardo Mosquera, Dan Cameron, eds. *Cildo Meireles* (London: Phaidon, 1999), 110—116.
‘circuit’, isolating it and fixing it. It is this concept that determines the dialectical content of the work, while interfering with each and every effort contained within the very essence of the process (the medium). In other words, the container always carries with it an ideology. My initial idea was based on the recognition of a ‘circuit’ that naturally exists. An ‘insertion’ into this circuit is always a form of counter-information.

An insertion capitalizes on the sophistication of the medium in order to achieve an increase in equality of access to mass communication. Additionally, it brings about a transformation of the original ideological propaganda inherent in the circuit – whether produced by industry or by the state. The effect of this ideological circuit is like an anaesthetization of public consciousness. The process of insertion thus contrasts awareness (a result of the insertion) with anaesthesia (the property of the existing circuit). Awareness is seen as a function of art and anaesthesia as a product of the alienation inherent in industrialized capitalism.

Art, of course, has a social function and has more ways than industry of creating a greater density of awareness in relation to the society from which it emerges. The role of industry is exactly the opposite of this. As it exists today, the power of industry is based on the greatest possible coefficient of alienation [...]

A transaction occurs in the plastic arts which is based either on the mystique of the work in itself or the mystique of its author; or it moves towards the mystique of the market – the game of ownership and exchange value. Strictly speaking, none of these aspects should take priority. As soon as distinctions start to be made in one direction or another, a further distinction emerges between those who can make art and those who cannot. The way I conceived it, the Insertions would only exist to the extent that they ceased to be the work of just one person. The work only exists to the extent that other people participate in it. What also arises is the need for anonymity. By extension, the question of anonymity involves the question of ownership. When the object of art becomes a practice, it becomes something over which you can have no control or ownership. Furthermore, to the extent that you no longer need to go to the information (because the information comes to you) the right conditions are created for ‘exploding’ the notion of a sacred space [...]

In so far as museums and galleries form a sacred space for representation, they become like the Bermuda Triangle: anything you put there, any idea, is automatically sucked in and neutralized by the context of display. I think art tries primarily to make a commitment with the public; not with the purchaser of art (the market), but with the audience sitting out there in the stalls. The shadowy presence of this envisaged
audience is the most important element in the whole endeavour. One works with the possibility (that the plastic arts provide) of creating a new language to express each new idea. Always one works with the possibility of transgressing reality, to make works that do not simply exist in an approved, consecrated, sacred space; that do not happen simply in terms of a canvas, a surface, a representation. No longer working with the metaphor of gunpowder, one uses gunpowder itself. No longer concerned with the object, one is left with a practice, over which there can be no control or ownership [...]

II

When Marcel Duchamp stated that his aim was to free art from the dominion of the hand, he could not foresee the point art would reach by 1970, with the development of conceptualism. The source of art (in the handmade, which, at the time Duchamp was writing, could be located easily and effectively combated) has now been displaced from the hand to the brain – an area that is harder to access and apprehend.

Today, Duchamp’s phrase reminds us of a lesson that has still not been learned. Duchamp fought not so much against the dominion of the hand as against the process of manual craftsmanship; against the gradual emotional, rational and psychological lethargy that habitual, mechanical labour inevitably produces in the individual. The struggle today should be not against the handmade but against its logic.

The fact that one’s hands are not soiled with art means nothing except that one’s hands are clean. Yet what one sees in much current conceptually-based art is simply relief and delight at not using one’s hands, as if everything were finally alright, as if at this moment artists did not need to start fighting against a much larger opponent: the habits and handiwork of the brain.

Style, whether derived from the hands or the brain (reason), is an anomaly. It is more intelligent to abort such anomalies than help them to survive.

Art–Culture

Duchamp’s intervention in the art system was in terms of the logic of the art object. Any intervention in this sphere today – given that culture, rather than an exclusive sphere of art, is now the subject – is necessarily a political intervention. For if aesthetics is the basis of art, politics is the basis of culture.
1 Insertions into circuits.

2 Insertions into ideological circuits.


Insertions
Science devotes itself to the study of static phases of phenomena. With this knowledge it seeks to categorize and determine these phenomena. However, science can only begin to understand these phenomena fully by coming face-to-face with them – adopting the same viewpoint as the phenomena themselves. To explain by analogy: We can learn virtually nothing about a film if the only knowledge we have of it is random, isolated, individual frames.

In the action of ‘insertion’ it is velocity that specifically interests me. Here it is a matter of verifying the actual speed of the process.

Circuits
Referential system, circulation, range.
Awareness within anaesthesia.
The need for a new kind of behaviour that is also critical: a natural imposition.
Translated interpretations that cease to have any importance when interpretations are no longer made like works.
The theme becomes raw material.
Marcel Duchamp’s readymades begin to indicate this anaesthesia but do not act on it.
They can be considered art objects.
Criticism can only breathe if it understands the following:

1. It is not dependent upon any other activity but upon a different level of focus on the same problem.
2. In any race where the artist is the driver, the technical team are the hot-rods.
3. The problem may be one of immersion, rising or expansion.
4. The problem may be of a philosophical or a didactic nature.
5. To survive the problems consequent upon its own process of historical development, criticism must be more lucid and wide-ranging, less meta-critical.
6. The circulation of coins (ideology)
   Static industrial products (ideological circuits)
   Periodicals, magazines (ideological circuits)
   Radio, television, cinema (ideological circuits)

Insertion into Existing Circuits

[... ] The opposite of readymades. Also the opposite of what André Breton proposed (putting into circulation enigmatic objects that derive from dreams), because Breton never concerned himself with the kinds of circuits involved, predominantly referring to the so-called art circuit, which is today perfectly dispensable.
The first step: to replace the notion of a market with that of the public.
The need for a market, and progressive concern about it, leads today's Brazilian artists into committing increasingly serious errors:

1. Slavish dependence on a model with colonialist characteristics which is in its death-throes.
2. Discrimination towards the public.
3. Thematic pretence, where denunciation of violence gives rise to a delicate tragic farce, or inconsequential immersion in landscape, or passive, closet intellectualism.
4. A sad connivance with the constituted powers.
5. Creative anaesthesia.
6. A shameful ideological betrayal of the majority of Brazilians.
Where the notion of fraternal sharing of information and culture is replaced by that of the empowered consumer, an attitude of playing emerges; in these conditions the most that can be achieved is a model that already exists, known and recognizably reactionary. If the history of the plastic arts is the history of the bourgeoisie itself, it is no mere coincidence that the Renaissance is now seen historically as a proto-bourgeois revolution. In Brazil today, one can observe the model of the artist-marchand—a relationship of production, distribution and consumption. This system is founded on the systematic favouring of the individual who purchases, invests and creates humiliating conditions for those who produce. However, today artists can direct their creative abilities towards acquiring (shaping) a behaviour that focuses on:

1. Exploiting no one; allowing no one to exploit oneself.

In other words, incorporating into the production process 60 to 70 per cent of the reality that surrounds us.

This is not romanticism. The current economic reality of our planet explodes the ideological mystique of the artist [...]

2. Rio de Janeiro, 1970. This text was written contemporaneously with the development of the insertion projects. Published as "Insérgidos em Círculos Ideológicos" in Metasseries, No. 1, Rio de Janeiro, September/November 1975, p. 15. Revised 1999.
In an interview with this author Meireles mentions the important contribution of the artist Damián Ortega, who developed a project to photocopy and reproduce small editions of artists’ catalogues that are rare or out of print. Meireles mentions that this catalogue brought new written material about the about the *Insertions* series.

![Image](image.png)

**Figure A.6.** Cildo Meireles, writings on *Insertions* series, n.d. Source: Damián Ortega, *Cildo Meireles* (Mexico City: Alias, 2009), 149.
This is another piece by Meireles in which he provides feedback for *A Nova Crítica*. Whereas Meireles suggests that the work is an introduction to a kind of criticism, Morais asserts that the work *is* the new critique.

The text in the image above is translated as follows: Wooden chair, with nails on the seat and black netting on iron frame. Proposal for an exercise of a critique that would occur in such a way that the nature of its process and the material employed on it would coincide with the nature and material of the object on which the critique would focus. In the present case, one tried to establish an oppositional relation between Man Ray (his *Cadeau* and the impulse towards exteriority) and Hélio Oiticica (the *Nests* and the appeal towards internalization).
Figure A.8. McShine’s letter to Meireles advising him to send *Arte Física: Caixas de Brasília* [Physical Art: Brasilia Boxes/Clearing], 1969. Source: Cildo Meireles’s studio archives.

It is written at the bottom page: “P.S. I saw your work and slides in Rio in December and hope you can provide something manageable. Like the box piece BRASILIA?”
Figure A.9. Frederico Morais, comment on Thereza Simões’s work at A Nova Crítica, 1970. Source: Frederico Morais’s archives.