

Northeastern as a statement of resistance

After several failed attempts across years and geographies, I finally I met artist [Ícaro Lira](#) in September 2019 in London, when he was midway through a three-month residency at Delfina Foundation. Two Brazilians from the Northeast Region encountering in the land of the Queen and Brexit, in the era of Bolsonaro. Perhaps then it was then inevitable that the current political, social and economic context would permeate our conversations. However, such matters are also at the heart of Lira's artistic practice; formed of long-term and process-based projects which intertwine the stories of historical and contemporary social struggles of subalternised groups from Brazil.

I was very curious to speak to Lira, as I have been attentively following the trajectories of the new generation of artists that have emerged from Brazil's Northeast Region. In stark contrast to my contemporaries, this younger generation began their journeys in an environment that had benefitted from a decade of policies from the Worker's Party (PT), which increased public investment in culture and provided money to regions beyond the dominant São Paulo – Rio de Janeiro axis. This redistribution of financial support as well as the recognition of other art scenes generated new opportunities for the circulation of people, codes, ideas and projects. Obviously, the internet, social media and the digital technologies have also played a part in this transformation, but at a moment when what remains of state support for the arts is being destroyed by the new Brazilian government it feels important to stress the role of public funding and its impact.

In Ícaro Lira's generation I perceive an urgency in approaching the past and the symbols of the Northeast Region, though undoubtedly with a critical and sophisticated perspective. In the late 1990s and in the early 2000s, my generation we were still trying to understand what was this so-called contemporary art and we had to fight to develop local strategies for building a professionalised art field. We wanted to be visible on the art world map and not be obliged to migrate in order to be part of the art game. Historically, the Northeast Region is The Other of the modernised and cosmopolitan São Paulo and the traditional Rio de Janeiro, stigmatised as being anachronistic, backward and parochial. It took a lot of collective effort to challenge these perceptions and build the conditions for producing local international artists. What I understood from my conversations with Lira, and previously with his peers from the region, is that issues of provincialism, centre/periphery, global/local, and contemporary art codes appear to no longer be an issue for them. It seems that it is why they want (or can) to talk about the Northeast to the world and are able to take the region with them while traveling around the globe. They have updated conceptual tools and critical lenses enabling them to discuss it in an engaging, profound and understandable way for both local and international audiences.

Ícaro Lira, however, didn't graduate in the Northeast. His higher education and his subsequent years of formation and socialisation took place in Rio de Janeiro, where he studied cinema at Darcy Ribeiro Film Institute, and later resided in São Paulo. It looks like this distance from his home region was seminal in being able to approach it with a fresh and more universal perspective. While he had left the Northeast, the Northeast didn't leave him; this peripheral

viewpoint remained, allowing him to see things beyond hegemonic narratives. In previous works, like *Museum of the Foreigner* (2014-ongoing) Lira questioned the absence of marginalised groups from Brazil's official narratives of the country's history of migration. For example, the Museum of Immigration in São Paulo highlights the arrival and presence of Europeans and Japanese and their descendants and but gives no mention of groups such as Haitians, Bolivians or the importance of the internal migration of Northeasterners to the growth of the city. The first version of Lira's museum was composed of heterogeneous documents such as articles that has been published in Brazilian newspapers on the topic of foreigners in the country, the national law of immigration, old pictures of immigrants and reproductions of historical paintings like *Ham's Redemption* (1895), by Modesto Brocos [1]. In 2017, at Festival Videobrasil, *Museum of the Foreigner* evolved to a platform and embraced the participation of artists from Haiti, Congo, Syria, Palestine and Angola who were new residents in Brazil. Their art works appeared along with part of documentation that had formed the project's previous iteration and alongside the installation a series of cycle of meetings and discussions were held.

In a similar realm, Lira's project *Exile – Ethnographic Expedition of Fiction* (2012-2014) entangles history and imagination, the past/present/future of the struggles and resistance of Northeast, the destruction of Canudos and the gentrification that resulted from the regeneration projects undertaken in the name of the FIFA World Cup in 2014. Through Lira's framing those conflicts can easily be related to other forced migrations and social exclusions around the world. Field trips to Canudos [2] and Juazeiro do Norte, documents found in public archives and the dialogue with artists, researches and curators resulted in a publication that blurs the borders between documentation and fiction.

During our meeting at Delfina Foundation, Lira showed me some materials from and documentation of his latest work that was part of the current exhibition *Meta Archive: 1964-1985 – space for listening and reading stories of the dictatorship*, curated by Ana Pato, at SESC Belenzinho, in São Paulo. His contribution to the show brings attention to the history of Radical Criticism, a political group from the Northeastern city of Fortaleza. The group's activities started at the end of the 1970s as a profound confrontation with capitalism and its members were also involved with the Women's Movement for Amnesty and all the major demonstrations for democracy during the military dictatorship. After the return to democracy one of the group's members, Maria Luiza, was elected as the first female mayor of Fortaleza. As in Lira's other works, the story is told after intense research and interactions with the protagonists themselves. The narrative is the culmination of the gathering of many documents, vestiges and voices. The work comprises leaflets made by Radical Criticism, a video, posters and an audiotape with a collection of interviews broadcasted in TV and radio stations about diverse themes and sources such as the fire in the Museum of Modern Art of Rio de Janeiro (1978), a speech of the dictator General Ernesto Geisel (1978) at Bahia and a speech of Jair Bolsonaro just after his election (2018). I believe that, as usual, this work is an unfinished process, open for further additions and new twists. In fact, Lira's method serves as a trigger; setting off procedures for unveiling traces, making visible (hi)stories and imagining new ways of mobilisation and resistance.

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[1] The painting illustrates the controversial theory of “whitening” the Brazilian society, depicting three generations of a family that succeed in making their descendant whiter: a black grandmother, a mestizo daughter and a pale baby – the son of a European.

[2] The settlement of Canudos was established at the end of 19th century by a messianic leader called Antonio Conselheiro, in the backlands of Bahia. It was a community with more than 30,000 residents. After many unsuccessful attempts at military suppression, it came to a brutal end in October 1897, when the Brazilian army invaded the place and killed nearly all the inhabitants. The war of Canudos is considered the deadliest civil war in Brazilian history.