

Porto Alegre (Brazil) in the 1970s: Authoritarian State and Abstraction in Public Space

José Francisco Alves

Porto Alegre, Brazil

ABSTRACT

During the 1960s and 1970s, a number of South American countries went through devastating military regimes. They were supported — if not organized — by United States as a form of preventing a growing leftist influence in the continent and a possible “realignment” of such nations with the Soviet Block. The main dictatorship in Latin America occurred in Brazil, Argentina, Chile and Uruguay.

In March 31 of 1964, Brazil deepened itself into the Military Dictatorship, which lasted more than twenty year, the longest dictatorship regime of the continent. At the time, under the presidency of João Goulart (elected as vice-president in 1960 that had sworn as President when the President Jânio Quadros resigned, in the following year). The Goulart administration was tumultuous and followed by political instability mainly due to the measures he wanted to put in action in the country as well as by the rather conservative environment, which offered great resistance to his policies. When the president Jânio Quadros resigned in august of 1961, João Goulart was in a diplomatic mission in Chine. The military forces and the conservative members of the congress prevented him from taking the oath and a civil war almost took place by sectors eager to guarantee he would be allowed to take the presidency. Goulart undertake of his place, as President was only

possible due to a popular movement, which occurred in the city of Porto Alegre, in the South of Brazil. In that, respect the coup was only postponed...

João Goulart was a rich farmer from the state of Rio Grande do Sul and was the greatest leader of a faction called “Trabalhismo” (under the Partido Trabalhista Brasileiro) of popular appeal and with significant support from the worker’s class. Its policy, from “communist inspiration,” according to opposition, was nothing more than popular measures of a social-democratic matrix. Goulart used to call his proposals by “Reformas de Base” [Base Reforms], that is: Educational Reform (from fighting literalness to changes in the higher educational system); Tributary Reform (with greater control of sending reserves abroad); Electoral Reform (right to vote for illiterate and the military of lower ranks); Land Reform (des-appropriation of unproductive land); Urban Reform.

In March 31 of 1964, now a well plane military coup would become a reality and President João Goulart was removed and send to exile. The militaries (Army, Navy and Air Force) took the government. For a few days, the president of Congress took the presidency and a great deal of political and syndical leaders, public officials, members of the military, were removed from offices and exiled. An indirect presidential election was made with the support of a submissive congress which place in the presidency the marshal Castello Branco (1964-1967). An authoritarian government was set in motion. However in 1968, forced by the democratic resistance at the second military term, under the presidency of the marshal Costa e Silva (1967-1969), the military dictatorship was aggravated and took the form of State Terrorism with clandestine prison, torture, murdering of opposition leaders, culture and press censorship without precedents. Because of that, part of the resistance to the military

opted for organized guerrilla fight in distant regions of urban centers.

This period of the Brazilian Military Dictatorship, which correspondent to the years of 1968 to 1974 (at the end of the President-general Emilio Medici dictatorship), became known as the “Anos de Chumbo” [Years of Lead], due to the great number of terror acts employed by the state. About the economic aspects, in the same period the country went through what became known the “Economic Miracle.” With an extraordinary superavit of the economy, up to 10% a year (mainly due to the ingress of foreign capital). The greatest inheritance however of such “miracle,” which didn’t last throughout the following decade was the public deficit (Dívida Externa) and inflation rates without precedents, as well as a concentration of wealth at the hands of few which made from Brazil up to today one of the countries with the largest gap between the rich and the poor.

Only in 1985, with the election by the Congress of the civilian opposition leader Tancredo Neves for the presidency the country would officially leave dictatorship behind. Unfortunately, Tancredo Neves would die before taking the presidency and his vice-president, a representative of the old and most backwards oligarchies of the country politically tied to the supporters of Military Dictatorship. Only in November of 1989, the country would have its first presidential elections after 29 years of dictatorship.

RESUMEN

Durante los años 1960 y 1970, varios países de América del Sur pasaron por devastadores regímenes militares. Contaron con el apoyo - si no organizados – de los Estados Unidos como una forma de evitar una influencia cada vez mayor de izquierda en el continente

y una posible "reestructuración" de las naciones como con el bloque soviético. Las principales dictaduras en América Latina fueron en Brasil, Argentina, Chile y Uruguay.

El 31 de marzo de 1964, Brasil profundizó en la dictadura militar, que duró más de veinte años, el régimen de dictadura más largo del continente. En ese momento, bajo la presidencia de João Goulart (elegido como vicepresidente en 1960 y que había jurado como presidente cuando el presidente Janio Quadros renunció al año siguiente). El gobierno de Goulart fue tumultuoso y seguido por la inestabilidad política debido, principalmente, a las medidas que quería poner en acción en el país, así como por el ambiente más bien conservador que ofreció gran resistencia a sus políticas. Cuando el presidente Janio Quadros renunció en agosto de 1961, João Goulart estaba en una misión diplomática en China. Las fuerzas militares y los miembros conservadores del Congreso le impidió tomar juramento y casi se produce una guerra civil espoleada por sectores deseosos de garantías para que se les permitiera ganar la presidencia. Goulart se ratifica en sus posturas, y es elegido presidente gracias a un movimiento popular, que tuvo lugar en la ciudad de Porto Alegre, en el sur de Brasil. En este momento, el golpe de Estado no pasó de intentona ...

João Goulart era un campesino rico del estado de Rio Grande do Sul y fue el mayor líder de una facción llamada "Trabalhismo" (bajo el Partido Trabalhista Brasileiro), de atractivo popular y con un importante apoyo de la clase del trabajadora. Su política, de "inspiración comunista", según la oposición, no era más que medidas populares de una matriz social-demócrata. Goulart utiliza para llamar a sus propuestas de "Reformas de Base", es decir: de la Reforma Educativa (desde la lucha contra la literalidad de los cambios en el sistema de educación superior); Reforma Tributaria (con un mayor control del envío de las reservas en el

extranjero); Reforma Electoral (derecho a votar por analfabetos y los militares de rangos inferiores); Reforma Agraria (desapropiación de tierras no productivas); Reforma Urbana.

En 31 de marzo de 1964, el golpe de Estado, se convertiría en una realidad y el presidente João Goulart fue depuesto y enviado al exilio. Los militares (Ejército, Armada y Fuerza Aérea) ocupan el gobierno. Durante unos días, el presidente del Congreso tomó la presidencia y una gran cantidad de dirigentes políticos y sindicales, funcionarios públicos, miembros de las fuerzas armadas, fueron retirados de las oficinas y exiliados. Una elección presidencial indirecta se realizó con el apoyo de un Congreso sumiso que pone en la presidencia al mariscal Castello Branco (1964-1967). Un gobierno autoritario se puso en marcha. Sin embargo, en 1968, forzado por la resistencia democrática en el segundo escalafón militar, bajo la presidencia del mariscal Costa e Silva (1967-1969), la dictadura militar se vio agravada y tomó la forma del terrorismo de Estado con la cárcel clandestina, la tortura, el asesinato de líderes de la oposición, la cultura y la censura de prensa sin precedentes. Por eso, parte de la resistencia a los militares optaron por la lucha de guerrillas organizadas en regiones distantes de los centros urbanos.

Este período de la dictadura militar brasileña, correspondiente a los años de 1968 a 1974 (al final de la dictadura presidente general Emilio Médici), llegó a ser conocido como los "Años de Plomo", debido al gran número de actos terroristas perpetrados por el Estado. Acerca de los aspectos económicos, en el mismo período el país pasó por lo que se conoce el "milagro económico". Con un superávit extraordinario de la economía, hasta el 10% al año (principalmente debido a la entrada de capital extranjero). La mejor herencia sin embargo de tal "milagro", que no duró toda la década siguiente fue el déficit público (Deuda externa) y

las tasas de inflación sin precedentes, así como una concentración de la riqueza en manos de unos pocos que hizo de Brasil hasta el día de hoy uno de los países con mayor brecha entre los ricos y los pobres.

Sólo en 1985, con la elección por el Congreso del líder de la oposición civil Tancredo Neves a la presidencia del país, va a desaparecer, oficialmente, la dictadura. Por desgracia, Tancredo Neves morirá antes de jurar la presidencia y su vicepresidente, un representante de la vieja y retrógrada mayoría de las oligarquías del país, mantendrá el país atado a los partidarios de la Dictadura Militar. Sólo en noviembre de 1989, el país tendría su primera elección presidencial después de 29 años de dictadura.

The local context throughout the years of 1970-1979

With the Military Dictatorship, direct elections for the state governments as well as for the cities and most important capital were revoked, especially those considered of “national security.” A number of changes made by the military in 1966 created in Brazil only two political parties, the ARENA (Aliança Renovadora Nacional), the party connected to the dictatorship, and the MDB (Movimento Democrático Brasileiro), the political party connected to the opposition. Therefore, governors, city Mayors, presidents of parliament both state and municipal, as well as higher

officials and directors of public services were always from the situation party (ARENA).

The administration of culture at the federal level and at the state was linked to administrative organisms of educational sphere and not culture as we have today. It that respects it was considered some sort of superfluous activity, without any autonomy. Thus, policies and projects in the field of public art as we see today were tied to administrative departments of cities and public officials of public institutions according to each case.

At the end of the 1960s, with the beginning of the so-called “Economic Miracle,” an urban planning policy without precedents started to be elaborated by the city of Porto Alegre, in the State of Rio Grande do Sul, with a number of infra-structural projects, modern urban ways, buildings and public parks, projects that were put in motion between 1970 and 1979. All such initiatives were elaborated under the auspices of an authoritarian state, since they were planned by the administrations of the ARENA party, by governmental departments equally administered by members the same party, supported by the Military Dictatorship.

Public Art and Urban Planning

The phenomenon I want to analyze in this paper is related to the fact that, for the first time in the state of Rio Grande do Sul — and possibly in Brazil —, urban and architectonic projects contained the presence of art as complement. Even more extraordinary was the fact that the commissioned works for these projects were in its great majority of “modernist inspiration:” abstraction for the first time occupied the urban space, intentionally and in a meaningful way. Many of the artists who works in such commissions by invitation were able to work with great freedom as well as, many of them were well know militants of leftist orientation.

Which factors determined that the language employed in public projects during that time were of modernism influence, as opposed to social realism in the East Europe for example, and furthermore within a space impregnated with public art of academic orientation, mainly in the field of statuary?

Whose public officials and administrators working or connected to the totalitarian state were favorable to such orientation and what was exactly the role they played in that context?

Public Art as an Element of Urbanism

The urban projects in the city of Porto Alegre developed under the Authoritarian State, specially from the 1970s on, were undertaken, in its majority, at during the term of the Mayor and engineer Telmo Thompson Flores (1969-1975), from the ARENA's party. He was appointed as Mayor of the capital of Rio Grande do Sul by the Governor Walter Peracchi Barcelos (elected indirectly, that is by state parliament, by ARENA as well). During this same period, the general-President Emilio Medici (1969-1974) governed the country, with an iron-fist.

The most important department of Municipal Government of Thompson Flores administration was the *Secretaria de Obras e Viação* (SMOV), in charge of planning and undertaking of extensive urban projects. The engineer responsible for SMOV was Plínio Oliveira Almeida, perhaps the main intellectual mentor of the idea of using art in architectural and urban enterprises during that period. He invited the sculptor Vasco Prado (1914-1998) to make the first work of public art. After the artist projects an outstanding model, the decision was left to the Mayor Thompson Flores, who got in contact with the model at the artist's studio. The artwork, a large concrete panel, was

installed at the Viaduct called “Loureiro da Silva Mayor,” inaugurated in November 5 of 1970. Even though the panel was a literal homage to the ex-Mayor, the Vasco Prado’s work was in reality a bucolic image of Porto Alegre, with many flowers, the Guaíba Lake and the profile of skyscrapers of the city, creating a landscape observed by a dating couple on horseback. For the first time the city had a public artwork, which was going against the grain, contrary to the academicism and the language of statuary as a commemorative element. In addition, who was the invited artist? Vasco Prado. An old fighter for the humanist causes who had run for office as a congressman affiliated to the Communist Party of Brazil (PCB) in 1946. In the decade of 1950, he was one of the founders and editors of the *Horizonte* magazine, tied to the intellectuals of PCB, a part that was illegal since 1947 (until 1986). Vasco Prado had been also one of the founders of the *Clube de Gravura* [Printmaker’s Club] from the city of Bagé and Porto Alegre, whose main purpose was to produce art with social themes and politically engaged. These prerogatives were greatly informed by the experience of the *Taller Grafica Popular* – TGP [Studio of Popular Graphics], from México. Later on, after his studies in Europe Vasco Prado’s work “started to show an even more synthetic and abstract character.”

Sometime later in 1972, one of the most important administrative units of state Government of Rio Grande do Sul, the powerful *Departamento Autônomo de Estradas de Rodagens* (DAER) [Autonomous Department of Roads] through the intervention of his president, once more invited Vasco Prado to pay homage to a prominent figure. This time it was a monument to the engineer José Batista Pereira. The option of Vasco Prado this time around, was bold and the artist produced a gigantic non-figurative *assemblage*, with found material and used equipment employed in the construction of roads.

To refer on this Abstract, to some of the most important public works by Vasco Prado in the period, I conclude with and immense aluminum panel (34 x 3, 6 m) which he produced, allusive to the Farroupilha Revolution (a political movement which occurred in Rio Grande do Sul against the Imperial Brazilian Government, between 1835 and 1845). The work was produced for the facade of the new headquarters building of the Rio Grande do Sul parliament, in 1973, this time selected by an open call. Members of ARENA, the party that presided the parliament at that time, however organized the open call.

For this panel/monument, Vasco Prado elaborated scenes related to the Farroupilha Revolution in a language

rather abstractive, with cut figures in aluminum, revealed by means of light and shadow.

Carlos Tenius (1939), on the other hand, was an artist sympathetic to the military dictatorship and obtained a number of commissions of artworks to be placed in urban ways and public buildings. Coming from the School of Arts of Federal University of Rio Grande do Sul, his work in steel gained notoriety by his geometric, almost abstract shape of forms, which were influenced, in many aspects, by the British artist Lynn Chadwick (1914-2003). His first big commission was the *Monumento aos Açorianos* [Monument do the People of Açores] that paid homage to the immigrants that colonized Porto Alegre in the 18th Century, coming from the Açores Islands, Portugal.

This monument, commissioned directly by the Mayor Thompson Flores, came to occupy a place of distinction within a new urban complex in downtown Porto Alegre. Inaugurated in 1974, the significant sculptural group in corten steel called attention by the raw treatment of the surfaces of a “no-noble” material in public art up to that point, and by the sophisticated abstract language employed. The public rejection to the work by the press took shades of conservatism, in a clear refusal to the work that paid homage through a modern perspective of a monument. In defense of

the artist, besides the Municipal Government from the ARENA party, among other was the prestigious urban specialist — and communist — Francisco Riopardense de Macedo (1921-2007). The success and the defense of public works by Tenius by the artistic community would not happen again in relation to his future public commissions.

In 1975 and 1977, the works of Tenius appeared at the façade of the conservative Association of University Professionals of Brazil (APLUB), with the sculpture “Vigilante” (which begs the question to whom it watches? Is it ideological surveillance?), and the headquarter of Montepio da Família Aeronáutica Brasileira (MONTAB), entitled “Solitary Flight.”

In 1977, a group of entrepreneurs decided to pay homage to the marshal Castello Branco, the first dictator of the military regime of 1964. Among the invited artists to make the proposal, were the artists Vasco Prado and Francisco Stockinger. The only one who accepted the commission, however was Carlos Tenius. This was the most polemic project to which he dedicated himself, whom produced a gigantic group of three geometrical figures in corten steel with 28 meters high. Since the “legs” of the figure were made with extreme verticality, it resulted in a group that resembles an observatory of surveillance. In the

words of the artist, the meaning of the work: "...with an spirit of Order and Progress, of permanent vigilance for the safekeeping of the man's rights [...] which raises in this place the figure of sentinel [...] In the desire of the vigilance for the destiny of the Country..."

Tenius's monument to the marshal Castello Branco failed also by its condition of public artwork not planned for a specific place. Way to big in scale, there was no public place, which could house such work, embarrassing even the leaders of ARENA. The work them, after many attempts in several spaces was placed, at the Moinhos de Ventos's park, a non-ideal place for it. It was inaugurated at the same time of the park itself, in 1979, by the president of Brazil, the general João Figueiredo, the last military president of the country.

In a urban project in 1972, the major tunnel located in downtown Porto Alegre received a work by the sculptor Francisco Stockinger (1919), the most important sculptor of Rio Grande do Sul, invited by the Mayor of ARENA party, Thompson Flores. Stockinger was also an artist engaged along the years with leftist causes, before and after the military dictatorship. At the same time, Stockinger also had public works commissioned by local and foreign financial institutions in Porto Alegre.

Conclusion

This and other case studies of public artworks in Porto Alegre produced and commissioned under the auspices of the Military Dictatorship, in the capital of the state of Rio Grande do Sul (Porto Alegre), between 1970 and 1979, reveal a complex cultural situation. From one side, the governors, affiliated to the Military Dictatorship: from the other, artists in its majority leftist militants. All these artists however, were chose by the specificity of the language of their works: works with modernist inspiration, open to contemporaneity, with a vocabulary driven against academicism and the commemorative statuary.

What makes this situation singular is the fact that the political leaders had no interest on the ideological thinking of attitudes of such artists, but their artistic vocabulary, the language employed by their works and the message it could convey. This meant in many ways a certain qualification of public space, the increasing cultural status of urban landscape.

The characteristic s of this complex context poses a singular question: the option made by dictatorship sponsored by the United States in South America was the one the employment of abstract language in public art. On the other

hand, when we think in terms of public art in the dictatorship sponsored by the Soviet Block, in the Eastern Europe, that propelled a great amount of public commemorative public art with a rather academic language, monumental and almost always figurative. This comparison is also the subject of the present paper.