

Capacete Village Microstate

Teresa Riccardi

I.

Capacete *Village*, any time of the year. Situation: Capacete office. A swimming pool, the water is nice, warm. Yes, the water in the office is almost always like this, very nice. It is basically that geometric figure, a perimeter containing warm blue water under a meridian sun. It is placed in an old rumbling residential estate. The owners, Helmut Batista (Capacete Entertainment), Denise Milfont (his life companion) and Oto (their little son) live nearby in an annex belonging to Dominique's González-Foerster¹, a very close old friend.

Another moment, could be January 2006. Above, the perfect sun of the carioca mid-afternoon. Those of us who were there dove in the *Village* pool just as naturally as one might enter a living room. The clear sweet water made a perfect balance of coolness and *preguiça*² to the fury of the heat -and the drinks. A cool oasis for our bodies suffering from an overdose of the tropical heat before submerging ourselves once again in the whirlwind of a Rio night. We were just letting ourselves float away on those relaxing waters when somebody popped up in the garden asking for Helmut. A friend of Helmut's, we thought? An artist? A young collector? He looked more like a curator. If I am not wrong, he was English, he lived in Asia and was recruiting Brazilian and Asian artists. He was just passing through and wanted to make compact with Capacete. A business visit. As any audacious phlegmatic man would do, after introducing himself and making a brief and formal inquiry as to the owner's whereabouts, the stranger jumped into the swimming pool with the same naturalness we had done before. The sweet water rectangle was so perfectly suited to the environment, that to inhabit any other space of the house during that wonderful afternoon would have seemed sheer nonsense. Once the new pool inhabitant had become acclimated, we let ourselves drift along with the conversation, this time in English.

¹ An artist born in Strasburg in 1965 who lives and works both in Paris and Rio de Janeiro. She has recently participated in numerous and important exhibitions of contemporary art and was invited by Capacete Entertainments to develop several projects between 2001 and 2003.

² *Preguiça*: idleness

On occasions like this, the pool becomes a kind of natural environment for a working system which combines the advantages of both productivity and leisure in an extraordinary way. It works as a perfect “perhaps”. For instance, if there is an interest in making the bodies there communicate among themselves, the homeostasis of the system (the pool) works and the stability condition factors are sustained in a continuous feedback: we all talk happily even perhaps sketching the beginning of some project. However, if any entropic element should be introduced (such as rain, cold, wind, anything offsetting the system) the homeostasis would be blocked: the water would get cold and those affected by that condition would eject their bodies from there. That pool has the speed and the virtue of activating itself instantaneously, for the sake of it, whether it be for something, for nothing, for sheer pleasure; nobody rushes into anything nor rules out anything. It simply is or is not, something happens or does not happen.

While my mind plays with these thoughts, I hear the conversation in off. I turn my head and see Helmut arrive. He greets us with a big smile –as usual-, and observes the *office*. He sees the stranger. With no sign of surprise, he keeps smiling and asks me, The water is nice?, *Otima!*⁵, I answer. Immediately he dives in and swims. He begins chatting without any previous introduction. In the Helmutian logic, there is nothing odd about the fact of finding a stranger in his swimming pool. And there’s nothing in the *Village* that makes us feel impertinent because of using a swimming pool without having met the host. Helmut listens carefully, remembers something and makes a comment; the English man realizes that he is facing the very host himself. They finally introduce each other, in that amphibious *Village* office, bodies partially submerged in the cool water, in an eternal afternoon, and business begins with a *doce balanço*⁴. They review common acquaintances until finally Helmut, without neither emphasis nor disdain -because he has nothing of that histrionic mechanism⁵- but with a sincere smile answers: Yes, I remember. We met in Vienna! They talk for some time, enough for both to see the possibilities of future business ventures. After a while, Helmut gets out the pool, and resumes the leisure cycle, telling all of us: Shall we make some drinks?

I was surprised by his homeostatic equilibrium. Helmut is always Helmut, both in public and private situations; he seems to make no difference whatsoever between them. He lives this system of work and life in an absolutely organic way. At that moment I thought that there is no distance at all between Helmut and Capacete. Nor did his face showed any signs of stress a curator's would in a similar situation.

II.

Are you acquainted with Río de Janeiro? If you are, what aspects of Rio do you know? Its musical culture, refined and popular at the same time, the *bossa nova* and

⁵ *Otima*: perfect, excellent

⁴ *Doce balanço*: gentle sway. An expression from the famous song *Garota de Ipanema*, recorded by Stan Getz, Astrud Gilberto y João Gilberto in 1963.

⁵ May be, after so many years of working for the Opera of Vienna, he became tired of the opera histrionics. Coordinating and directing this kind of production implies the supervision of at least three hundred people working on a stage production. In addition, Vienna is an international capital of Opera, with a frequency of three operas per week during the season. Helmut performed this task during the early and the mid 1990's.

the samba? Or the carnival? The old stories about the beauties and glories of its cinema? Or the decadent glamour of the Copacabana Hotel? Its heavenly beaches and beautiful parks of former imperial residence? Or rather, that other city, radical in its violence and hedonism which totally destroys any preconceived idea one might have of it? That other city, whose not so wonderful brutality and "atrocities" gives rise to Dame Capricious Desire who decadently tramples down any long term strategies for improvement?

In any event, we must recognize that this perspective traps the subjectivity in a hyper melancholic loop and is unable to explain the present sociability of these bodies which comprise the carioca subjectivity, so fleeting, penetrating, confusing and toughen on the surface. Capacete, which is far from that melancholy, builds its practice not on a past, but on a near present projected toward the future, contemplating its citizens, its forms of social being, in a totally innovating way in this context.

We wish to infer, at least in this work, that the transition from the artistic subjectivity of the 60' to that of the 80' decried a disillusion with the political frustration of the 70' but at the same time a capitalization of the rhizomatic activism of artistic practices in favor of a micropolitics of the nomadic, of the mobile. Within the savage capitalism logic –perforce via technology- the financial reality works and functions as a translocal globalized economy. In view of this, the dynamics of the resistance to the market is intelligently designed here as a performatic practice that Capacete makes its own in order to survive.

Helmut's Capacete Entertainment is not a miracle but a real practice, a permanent economic engineering sustained by financial support organisms typical of the market. His microstate is placed not outside but inside the market. The speed of the movements he produces, on which his existence depends, is strictly linked to the way in which his services are redistributed in accordance to the incomes obtained -and therefore reallocated to other sub-products. I am thinking of the *Village* project as a sub-product of the residential estate. In his way of operating, Capacete has achieved to create flexible boundaries with several institutions⁶ that periodically provide the possible material conditions of and for the performatic bodies in that territory.

Performatic, pragmatic practices, of alliances and partnerships, which are not so much about combating the consensus of ideology -although they are neither naïf nor cynical in their discourse- but which use that same elements to create micro spheres of biopower to inhabit with others, to create platforms, movements, places of encounter and also to open up to others who may not be involved in arts.

III.

How to get to that place where this physical and heavenly microstate can be found? They live high up, in Santa Tereza, a district neighborhood in the northern area of Rio de Janeiro, located on one of the many *morros*, where *favela* dwellers, bohemian middle class, workers and tourists entrench themselves. This beautiful area, which in

⁶ These institutions include Gasworks, FRAME, FONDS, MONDRIAN FOUNDATION, DANIEL LANGLOIS, HIAP, Japan Foundation, AIR, Consulado Geral do Rio de Janeiro, Centro Cultural Telemar, El Basilisco. Between 2002 and 2005 Capacete had its main headquarters at Darcy Ribeiro Cinema School in the center of Rio de Janeiro and for 2003 it received a major grant from the Daniel Langlois Foundation – Canada. In 2004 received a major grant from the Prince Claus Foundation – Netherlands.

the 1920's was a place of residence for the carioca upper class, today offers *ginga*⁷ of workers who still use the old *bondi* tram -as well as some bars in the surroundings- making the movement of getting on, getting off or hanging from it an expression of the carioca seduction and skill, as unique as the rhythm of the samba dance steps.

A diversity of tourist attractions are offered there for the newcomer. Towards the top of the hill, the promise of seeing Christ The Redeemer, once bathed in red⁸. On the way, the tram passes sharp-edgily through the Lappa Archs; on the way back, it skirts the lush groves of Tijuca. Stops are made at the very old square found on the way which, after so many intricate windings into small dead-end streets, look exactly the same to the unprepared eye.

Helmut is always guiding, traveling, driving, moving from one place to another, taking pictures⁹ here, there and everywhere. What is nice about visiting him is the fact that he is the best host to be found in the city. He likes moving around¹⁰, he has nomadic traits. The Capacete microstate founded by Helmut is physically located there but its virtual sovereignty extends far beyond. The politics of this microstate as a multiplied, oscillating movement of services and leisure activities in its most radical expression has one aim: to close the distance among human bodies.

IV.

And to talk about politics, shouldn't we start with a question about the bodies that compose a political subjectivity or biopower on the one hand and the body of the sovereign on the other? The former has been called the "Reserve Army" by Francisco de Oliveira¹¹ and since the 1970s has emerged as an alternative marginal source of informal labor, doing all sorts of odd-jobs. It was included and typified in the 1990s as a new configuration in the service economy and has become a continuous source of cheap labor, thereby reducing the costs of the urban work force.

Now, what are these bodies? Are they a bio-power? To this, I should add that this labor force represents, overall in their non-material work of services, a surplus of accumulated capital. If within this framework we contemplate the reality of the value

⁷ *Ginga*: a Portuguese term used in popular jargon to describe a kind of virtuous skill related to dance, football or a performatic event.

⁸ In 2004, artist Ducha added red filters to the light spots of Christ The Redeemer during some days until they were removed by the local authority. The press noticed one morning that "At dawn, the Christ was red". He worked on new projects for Capacete Entertaining in 2000, 2002, 2004 and 2005.

⁹ Helmut coordinates and runs Panaview, a company specialized in high quality photographic products, orbiculars, posters, brochures and books, printed with long lasting material of last generation technology.

¹⁰ ROAD is an interdisciplinary project created by Capacete with the support of several institutions in 2004 . It is an initiative of alliances, curatorial strategies and artistic practices related to the territories of Central and South America. It aims at making these practices available to a wider and more heterogenic public and at creating the bases for interchange and critical dialogue among the artists and their audience. It was born as an independent undertaking and later it gave birth to a series of projects of a "work-in-progress" kind, performed by a several artists -Ducha and Gabriel Lester among them- in different Latin American cities. At present, its form depends on the work process required by each artistic proposal and the general concept might be redefined according to the specific needs of the socio-cultural context it develops in. See www.capacete.net

¹¹ Francisco de Oliveira, "El Ornitórrico", *New Left Review*, N° 24, 2004, pp. 37-53

assigned to the labor market in Rio de Janeiro, we can only conclude that the *ginga*¹² and the *malandragem* have become a style of politics and represents the social economic coercion perpetrated by the neo-liberal state in a *continuum ad infinitum*. At times rebelling against and at times stagnating within the social fabric.

This subjects, currently burdened under one of Latin American severest fiscal and tax regimes, also suffer from the deterioration of public education, housing and living conditions within society. And thus the destabilizing potential of this teeming reality is deactivated.

In flagrant oblivion of guarantees and human rights, these bodies experience the consequences of a politics -determined by a neo-liberal economy in the 1990'- which, though seemingly different from the past, proves to hold an aphasic veneration in its non-inclusive, degenerative, socio-economical extortion and coercion for the prolonged dictatorship that dominated the country from 1964 to 1984.

Due to privatizations and culture undertakings of an industrial type and their *doppelgänger*, the culture industry perpetrated in modern times, finally erased even the memory of the social micropolitics conceived in the late 1960'.

The current political strategies as regards culture are totally unrelated to and out of step with social welfare activities. Within this context, then, how are artists produced? What place do they hold in this social, cultural and political complexity? █

Not as a definite answer, but merely as a way of thinking through and working with the reality we see: the place of the artists at present isn't one of political amnesia, for they proudly remember their social participation during other times and claim it as part of the national wealth by updating the popularization of the culture. Although, in this very act, there is also a commemorative shade of disillusionment from the symbolic cultural field, now falling victim to the industrial cultural machine which demands productivity over creativity.

I myself am not sure whether this is the place chosen by a cultural design enterprise such as Capacete. Although, -I am merely speculating-, this probable was the critical context that Helmut Batista found on returning home after ten years of absence to create Capacete Entertainment, assuming thereby the role of attending this consummated cultural violence, this no-man's land, this sterile land, to begin to activate a "supposed" demand in the local artistic scene.

V.

The city of Rio de Janeiro is composed of even more bodies and it is also governed by one of them: the sovereign. When it seems to be behaving lawlessly, the state is actually exercising its right, within its democratic and liberal definition, to decide whether and when to respect legality in the case of emergency. Then, giving the name of emergency to inequality, violence and terror, the sovereign suspends all law in favor of a political practice of biopower in which the citizens remain at the mercy of "naked" power. There, in that personal political decision outside the law is where the liberal economy triumphs over every aspect of social life. This quandary urges

¹² To consider the usage of the term "ginga" within the fields of arts, *favela* architecture and situationist theories through the work of Helio Oiticica, see Paola Berestein Jaques, *Estética da ginga*, Casa da Palavra, Rio de Janeiro 2001.

another kind of sovereignty or even a microstate -whichever might be possible- in order to recompose the damaged forms of human life.

This paradigm in which the exception is the rule, implies the elimination of all distinction between legitimate and non-legitimate violence. Thus, it is not about defending individual freedoms or civil rights, nor is it about attacking certain abuses of power. In fact, it is not about defending anything, but rather it is about showing that public violence is uncontrollable.

Amnesic and hedonistic, these subjects/non-subjects lack all state guaranties and that political insertion that a representative democracy presumes. These subjects, albeit cariocas, live in the democratic "norm" that Giorgio Agamben¹³ speaks about.

Paradoxically, in its dramatic nakedness, seen from this political perspective, the subject suffers a privation: his humanity. The sovereign exercises his power while the subject -now thought as a non-subject- anomic, on the beach, naked in his hedonism, struggles for a way out, without words, hiding and re-thinking those all too well known and guaranteed forms of extermination.

VI.

"The *favela* as an exception to the city, the informal work as an exception to merchandise, patrimonialism as an exception to inter-capitalist competition, state coercion as an exception to private accumulation"¹⁴. In this context of illegality as a norm, the field of art becomes formal, especially as it ignores its artists in their way of production. If the market is a regulator of various aspects of human life, what kind of incidences are prefigured in the economy, the market value, the circulation of goods which make an integration between art and life impossible? Which are the forms of current market consumption that increase the fragility of the social context? Which is the contemporary form of labor that relegates the subjectivity in favor of a mere interchange? An then, how do the forms of service interchange intervene in local and global contexts? Is there a place within this map for art as a critical strategy within this political nakedness and disappointment dominated by the economy?

VII.

Here then, a brief explanation of what I understand by micropolitics of state in Capacete. The operation and strategies designed in these last years respond, as mentioned before, to a reflection on an economy dominated by a savage and global capitalism, and by the illegality of the sovereign practice to decide solely by vetoing and forgetting his representation of the others. In the field and sphere of institutional art, there is nothing (power) or sovereigns. There is little room left for small constellations of local and international artists who do not find spaces of visibility and development within this framework. Capacete recomposes the figure of a redistributive state by creating sub-products for an economy of sustainable pleasure, autarchically moving around the area, trying to catch the essence of the ways its artists produce their work, in contrasting to the state which has become bureaucratic and inefficient.

¹³ Giorgio Agamben, *Estado de excepción*, Adriana Hidalgo Ed., Buenos Aires, 2003.

¹⁴ Francisco de Oliveira, *ibidem*, pp. 37-53.

Almost anonymous or unknown to the press and articulated as a non-profit civil association, Capacete neither sold nor commercialized his proposals. Rather, it prefers strategies of circulation and availability of complex projects in transit to a wider audience than the art public. The potentialities of these projects were seen in their future possibilities, by someone who believes and bets beyond his visual horizon and supports productions that require more than the visibility established by the regimes of an abundance of images. The choice and viability of the projects chosen by Capacete were made considering a long term projection on the bases of a finance economic plan that could be extended¹⁵.

Instead of the immediacy of the communication media, as suggested today by the exhibition devices themselves or, to put it in terms of market analysis, the abstraction of the value by which goods stop being material products to become capital flow in movement, belonging no place, no borders, no nations, artists are exhibited in their spatial movement, in their vectorial transversality, far from commercial circuits, more akin to project proposals, challenging the hegemonic possibilities of communication or discursivity in the art system. Within this context, the possibility of reflecting on the *trocas* and the subjective interchange that define the forms of what is human, of the physical encounter with the other, are the keys to understanding the artist as a producer, thus favoring a richer, multiple and less sovereign discursivity. If the artist is a producer of services¹⁶ instead of goods -and in this aspect I consider Capacete's work radical in its approach, in view of the context of institutional economy pauperization in which it is set and this makes his work a kind of *expertise*- the proposal of offering this type of services creates a tactile and inhabitable world of swimming pools and beaches. A glaring eye as brutal as the mid-day carioca sun, critical and piercing in its gaze upon the institutional is what is needed to be able to move and perform movement, to create a space of its own, a construct which is equally irresistible to the users. Its criticism is hedonistic, one of sheer pleasure, and, in any event, its contemporaneity lies in the attention and contextual diagnosis in a close follow up of the movements and changes of the global market of art, of its continuous transformation, of its cuts and flows, of its moments of detention. To chose, as he has, to insert himself in the commercial circuit, without betraying his own values, as when he exhibited works in the renowned commercial gallery Frederick Petzel, in such a way as to create a new twist in the movement of the Capacete microstate.

VIII.

¹⁵ In one of our conversations, H. B. stated "A questão da continuidade que aqui sublinho também com a escolha destes artistas; e não so nos projetos realizados como também na qualidade de alguns dos projetos que nem seriam possíveis de se realizar se não existisse esta possibilidade de manutenção ao longo prazo. Tal é o caso bem definido do projeto do Jean-Pascal Flavien com a casa, construído no terreno do artista Jarbas Lopes em sua fazenda Marica intitulado "VIEWER" que levou 4 anos para ser realizado".

¹⁶ The discussion about the artist as a producer of services may be considered from the point of view of a series of debates initiated by Andrea Fraser in 1994 in Vienna where Helmut met her and later invited her to carry out projects together with Capacete in 1998 and 2003. Also we may consider reflections made in Latin America by groups of Argentine artists since 2002 as regards the ways of working within the local art system and artistic professionalization. About Fraser, see *Museum Highlights. The writings of Andrea Fraser*, Cambridge Massachusetts. London England, MIT press, 2005.

If Capacete is devoted to the research, organization and availability of documentation on aesthetic, cultural and political processes in Brazil and other countries of South America, it is due to the fact that Latin American economic, geo-political, historical and urban contexts, even though they differ enormously one from the other, taken together form fertile ground for reflection, analysis and creativity using all the complexity of the continent in its multiple manifestations. Capacete regards as extremely important not only the work of continuous representation and development in the field of artistic expression, but also the establishment of platforms¹⁷ capable of organizing, activating and documenting the individual production of the artists.

The artists hereby presented, Ducha, Flavien and Lester, a native and two immigrants are, in a way, the peers and citizens who inhabit the Capacete microstate. (I think that a census on the users of the Capacete microstate services around the world would come to, after 10 years, more than one thousand subjects, at least) These, here represented, have been chosen for their mobile and performatic aspect, in which the body is at the same time the exhibition device. Somehow, the activated aspect of these artists' bodies, in rapid reaction to the ebb and flows of a temporality regulated by the value of that invasive, lacerating and yet seductive economy, responds in Ducha's case, by living for a month in a cave at the foot of the Sugar Loaf. In Flavien's, by creating an architectural structure, "the viewer", within a *fazenda* where a publishing house is located. And in Lester's, simply by performing Tai Chi movements in the snow-white Cordillera, at 5200 meters of height.

¹⁷ The strategies that were developed in those ten years for the creation of "platforms" by means of which artists could make their production available to an even greater audience took the form of: a residence program for artists; a quarterly magazine, "Planeta Magazine", edited between 2000 and 2004, with a print run of 7000 issues; catalogues of artists; a mobile office, BANCA N.2, presented in 2002 SP Biennale; the mobile project ROAD; a mysterious work called Market Economy; and Capacete Cinema, the latter in collaboration with and associated to other local and international cultural entities.