

"Visitors to the exhibition move as on a journey of discovery"

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Oliver Bulas deals not only critically with exhibition venues, but also with European, male and white exhibition practice. In Rio de Janeiro this year he presented his exhibition *WCW-nine* in a hotel room. The artist and curator assumed the role of a host. An interview about German and Brazilian art, extraordinary exhibition venues and the impact of colonial relations between Europe and South America in the present

Interview by Sophia Seifert

ifa: Mr Bulas, at your exhibition *WCW-nine* in March of this year in Rio de Janeiro you presented Brazilian and German art side by side. Why was that important to you?

Oliver Bulas: I've been in Brazil on a regular basis since 2009. All in all, I've lived there for three years. During the stays, Capacete, a residency program for artists, was an important starting point for me, and this year it also made the exhibition possible. In my opinion, every European should get a scholarship to stay in Brazil because, especially as a European, you can learn a lot there. When I talk to people in the arts in Brazil, it's usually very complicated to put the differences between the German and the Brazilian art industry into words. With the exhibition in Rio de Janeiro I wanted to show this.

ifa: What differences did you notice in the ten works of the exhibition?

Bulas: The Brazilian artists were more likely to show performances, while the Germans mainly presented objects. I found that interesting, because all the participating artists actually work with both performances and objects. Maybe the reason was that rituals, singing and oral speech play an important role in Brazilian society. For a large part of the population, the only means of the symbolic production of meaning and society that they have is the use of their bodies.

Thematically, the Brazilian artists also focused much more on the current social conflicts in Brazil. The exhibition took place immediately after the assassination of the openly lesbian black councilwoman Marielle Franco and stood in its shadow. What was to become glaring with the election of Jair Bolsonaro as president was then already looming.

ifa: How were these social conflicts reflected in the works of Brazilian artists?

Bulas: For example, the Brazilian artist group Opavivará! has exhibited several banners made of beach towels. These are an important subject in the culture of the inhabitants of Rio de Janeiro. The banners were emblazoned with political slogans such as "desarmar o desamor" - a pun that in German means "disarm the loveless". Another work consisted of a wall collage of female body parts. In this work, entitled *Revoluções!*, the Brazilian artist

Caroline Valansi seized on a discussion of Brazilian feminism and male access to the female body, a debate that already began in Brazil before the #MeToo movement.



Cangaço, 2018 Künstlergruppe: Opavivará!, Foto: Oliver Bulas

ifa: And what characterized the German works?

Bulas: The Berlin-based artist Andrea Winkler spanned barrier tapes in a room where several handbags were knotted together. By changing the purpose of the barrier tapes, which otherwise serve to separate areas, these were relieved of their function and so took on a sculptural character. The work was called *BAGS (Global Traveller)*. Another work, a graphic-like painting, showed the floor plan of a flat with lines of movement. The lines bore witness to how the artist, Julia Horstmann, had previously moved in the rooms. The German works confirmed certain stereotypes many Brazilian visitors have about German art. These include the precision and presentation of many of the works, with which the artists may want to control the possibilities of interpreting their works. In addition, there was a tendency among German artists to make an appreciatory gesture through their works, using certain materials or methods of presentation.

“At previous exhibitions, guests had to sneak past the hotel reception.”

ifa: You organized the exhibition as part of the exhibition series *WCW-nine*.

What is the project about?

Bulas: *WCW-nine* was created with the dissolution of the WCW-Gallery, a gallery that existed between 2008 and 2013 in Hamburg. There we dealt with the conditions of exhibiting in art galleries, imitating and staging the operation of a conventional gallery. At some point I became more and more disturbed that the program of the gallery was white, male, heteronormative and European. I missed a critical and emancipatory orientation. *WCW-nine* then separated itself from the gallery as a non-commercial part. The exhibition series is shown nomadically at different places. We also want to use hotel rooms as exhibition venues, as we already did with the WCW-Gallery. Rio de Janeiro was the first stop of *WCW-nine* - a kind of experiment.

ifa: What is the attraction for you of installing an exhibition in a hotel room?

Bulas: I'm very interested in the temporary nature of this kind of exhibition. The emphasis here is on the process. And add to that the aspect of being a guest. The exhibition in Rio de Janeiro had a very private character and the guests, after carefully crossing the threshold, often moved like detectives or as on a journey of discovery. In this domestic situation, I played the role of a host and guided the guests through the exhibition. Designing an exhibition for a hotel room also gives the project a subversive character. The previous exhibitions of the WCW Gallery in hotel rooms were never arranged with the hotel; the guests had almost to sneak past the front desk. That's why these exhibitions usually lasted only one evening, since there was always the danger that our cover would be blown and we'd have to break off.

ifa: The exhibition in Rio de Janeiro was also held in a hotel room, but it ran a total of five days. Did you discuss your project there with the hotel owner?

Bulas: Yes. In my view, because of the support from the ifa and the many participants, we couldn't risk having to cancel the exhibition at an early stage. The owner of the Ipanema Inn, where the exhibition took place, used to work at an art collection in London. As a result, he had little fear of contact with us. Originally we wanted to take some hotel that was rather away from the city centre. But many hotel owners in these areas were very sceptical when they heard the words "art" and "exhibition". The Ipanema Inn was the only hotel that wanted to risk the venture. It's located, however, in a fairly wealthy, tourist district near Copacabana.

"With my artistic work, I want to uncover blind spots and question things critically."

ifa: Why did you originally want to exhibit in more remote areas?

Bulas: When, as a European, you come to a developing country like Brazil with funding to

organize an exhibition, and then choose one of the richer areas of the city, it's like an expansion and demonstration of your own power. I was uncomfortable with this. For me, it has something to do with a colonial aspect, the continuing power relations between Europe and South America. I'd have preferred to present the exhibition in a place that would have given the event a different thrust. Some participating artists, such as the architect Mariana Meneguetti, suggested that the exhibition be organized in districts where poorer sections of the population live. What spoke against this for me was that it would have promoted a kind of "poverty tourism", like a safari. Because the art scene in Rio is composed of mainly middle-class people and you never run into people from poorer classes there.

ifa: This avoidance of European grandstanding is surely also related to the fact that you want to deal critically with white, male exhibition practice. But how can that succeed if you are yourself part of this "group"?

Bulas: That remains a dilemma. Not even my critical study of this subject will be able to free me from the group, that's a utopian idea. But for me, this relationship makes me very uncomfortable, especially in terms of colonial history. Although, of course, it's almost cynical to speak of an uncomfortable position while sitting here in cosy Berlin. The discomfort I mean includes questioning the role of the ifa in an international context. For me it's all about uncovering blind spots, staying alert and critically questioning things again and again. It's a process without end.

