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Inducing a failure in the apparatus:

art and counter-ideology

Introduction

The central provocation of this article is to analyze three artworks that operate by inducing a failure or interruption in the functioning of a certain system. Based on Vilém Flusser's apparatus concept, in dialogue with other authors who also mobilized concepts related to devices, machines, and automata to reflect on society, we argue the existence of a counter-ideological dimension in valuing inoperative as opposed to the logic of efficiency, performance, productivity, and consumption. The works we will discuss cause a short circuit between the apparatus as a machine/ system and the ideological/ cultural apparatus.

This reflection is part of a broader research that aims to analyze artworks with socio-critical views of reality and point out ideological discourse bias. We recognize art's ability to reclaim and discuss collective reality, impacting public space. However, we also understand that its political dimension (one of many potential approaches to artworks) can "contain or circumscribe both a critical and transformative sense, as well as maintenance and improvement of order" (Chaia, 2007, p. 33). Therefore, our focus is to identify works in the field of contemporary visual arts that have a potential counter-ideological experience in their poetic dimension. The concept of counter-ideology in this study is defined especially from the lectures on "Ideology and Utopia", by Paul Ricoeur (1991). The interest of this article lies in thinking about artistic propositions that discuss reality and point out distortions of ideological discourses.

In this perspective, we approach the concepts of apparatus and ideology, and those of failure and counter-ideology, as openings to perceive and reflect on the political poetics in the works exhibited on the Verter Platform[1] between 2020 and 2021. They are: *Ok/Cancel*, by Elias Maroso; *Inundação*, by Fran Favero; *Padrões Anômalos - Estudo 1*, by Cesar Baio.

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[1] Online space https://www.ufrgs.br/verter for the exhibition of artworks made or adapted for the internet and connected to the Laboratory of Image and Technology, in the Institute of Arts of the Federal University of Rio Grande do Sul, Brazil.

Apparatus/Ideology

Eager to understand the world and the impact of the domain of images and media culture, Vilém Flusser (2002) developed a broad concept of apparatus. Thinking about a camera is also thinking about the production of other technical and media imagery, in the different ways in which they modify our relationship with images, with the imaginary, and with the world, to the point of including the functioning of socio-political apparatuses. Photography (as a model of technical images) and camera (as a model of apparatus) mark a great potential change in representing, thinking, and relating to the world and the visible.

Flusser departs from this model to think critically about how to engage ourselves on different-scale pre-programmed systems, inside of which we have no access and, therefore, present themselves to us as black boxes. The camera, as a product of technology, is an indirect product of scientific text. The users become employees of the apparatus by not knowing this text, even though they know how to feed it to obtain certain responses. In the words of Flusser: "Who only sees input and output, sees the channel and not the encoding process that takes place inside the black box." (2002, p. 15).

The choices we can make when operating these apparatuses, if they give us an apparent idea of freedom, they are, however, limited to their programming, acting more like customizations of a pre-defined system: "For sure, the apparatus does what the photographer wants it to do, but the photographer can only want what the apparatus is capable of doing." (2008, p. 28). If this programming (or the text behind the apparatus behind the image) is not understood, how can it be questioned? Is it possible to create this way? Flusser himself answers such questions by pointing out that experimental photographers, for example, "know that their praxis is strategy directed towards the machine" (2002, p. 76).

Even so, such a human agent, and therefore subjective, interpretive, and potentially deviant element, is more evident in the making of traditional images. Technical images, on the other hand, have complex operator-machine relationships as intermediaries. The latter, being the result of codified scientific text, are covered with apparent objectivity, which "makes the observer look at them as if they were windows and not images. The observer trusts technical images as much as he trusts his own eyes. (...) The apparent objectivity of technical images is illusory since, in reality, they are as symbolic as all images are." (ibid., p. 20).

Taking a photographic device as a metaphor for society and social reality, a subject is also an employee of techno-social programs (Arantes, 2014). Marx and Engels (2007, p. 94) defined ideology as a darkroom. Therefore, just as a photographic darkroom reverses the captured image, ideology reverses the reality of social relations in people's understanding. Marx recovered the term

ideology from its primitive use to designate an interdependent set of meaning constructions derived from relations of production of material life in a given society. Ideology distorts the perception of something prior and essential (class struggle, praxis).

Transposing the works of Marx and his successors, Ricoeur (1991) preserved the meaning of the term ideology as a falsifying idea, which conforms subjects to their social roles. But he adds that it is the justifying and legitimizing elements contained in ideologies and utopias, never perfectly realized in the concrete experience of the subjects, that allow the awakening to a counter-ideological critique. The gap between concrete world reality, as a personal and collective experience, and its legitimizing discourses allow for the denunciation of arbitrariness in ideology. Utopian expectations that people have about reality are those that restore autonomy to subjects regarding social functioning. Counter-ideology resorts to denouncing the "automatism" of discourses used to legitimize social relations.

Therefore, machine-, mechanism-, and automaton-related concepts have been mobilized for reflection on social life instances and potential counter-ideological criticism. Flusser's propositions spark an interpretation line that has received important interest, it relates the use of technologies with questions of ideology and understanding of the world.

Three counter-ideological artistic proposals

The works we selected and prompted this reflection deal with the disruption of apparatus functioning as a counter-ideological metaphor, they are by Brazilian artists and were presented in three different online exhibitions on the Verter Platform[2].

I

Ok/Cancel (2020), by Elias Maroso, consists of a device (10x10-cm electronic circuit) capable of blocking 2G, 3G, and 4G cell phone signals. The work also comprises a tutorial on YouTube with

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[2] The inaugural exhibition was published in April 2020 and remained online until November of the same year. Entitled *Sendo dados* (Being data; in English), it was curated by Alessandra Bochio, Bettina Rupp, Marina Polidoro, and Pauline Gaudin, and featured the artists Fernanda Gassen, Elias Maroso, Jéssica Becker, Kátia Prates, Marina Polidoro and Augusto de Oliveira, and the collectives Telemusik (Marcus Bastos & Dudu Tsuda) and Mazdita (Flavia Pinheiro & Leandro Oliván). From April to November 2021, with curators Marina Polidoro and Claudia Zimmer, the works of artists Denise Helfenstein, Fabíola Scaranto, Fran Favero, Mayra Martins Redin, and Pauline Gaudin resulted in the exhibition *Paisagem-texto, paisagem-tempo* (Landscape-text, landscape-time; in English). Finally, from November 2021 to April 2022, the exhibition *Os dias em que as corujas caíram do céu* (The days when owls fell from the sky; in English) was online, curated by Elaine Tedesco and Marina Polidoro, and featuring the artists Cesar Baio, Clarissa Daneluz, Eduardo Montelli, Flavya Mutran, Joana Burd, Juliana Angeli, Leo Caobelli, Letícia Bertagna, Lívia Auler, Michel Zózimo, and Raquel Stolf.

a step-by-step guide that can be followed by someone interested in building their cell phone blocker. Therefore, it includes a demonstration of its construction, which is shared on a platform where other videos of this sort thrive. It thus dialogues with the *do-it-yourself* (DIY) culture, which involves amateurs and self-taught individuals, and with the culture of sharing information, collaborative work, and decentralization, which is a characteristic of hacker ethics and visible in free-software developer and user communities.
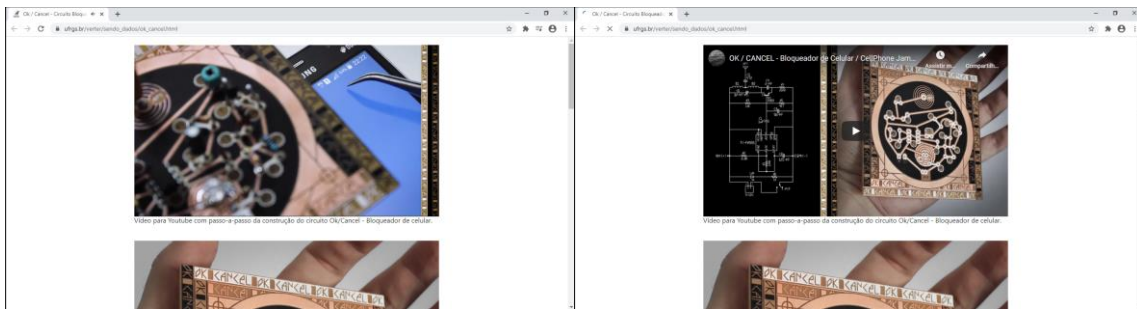

Figures 1 and 2: Maroso, Elias. *Ok/Cancel* (2020). Views of the online exhibition. Source: Verter Platform, 2020.

This work criticizes the current moment we are living in, where there is a popularization of digital technologies and the idea of objects being connected to the internet, the internet of things (IoT). Beyond being a great advantage as a facilitator that connects everything, it starts to reveal itself as a threat that collects, uses, negotiates, and passes on our data without our knowledge, including influencing our future behavior. If we are always connected, are we always being watched? By proposing a blocker of these signals - even if the effective blocking takes place in a reduced perimeter - with a signal transmitter that competes with the signals of the carriers, occupying their space, producing noise, and interrupting transmission, Maroso creates a "free" area around himself.

II

In the video *Inundação* (2015), by Fran Favero, we see radio broadcasting reports, in Spanish, Portuguese, and Guarani, about how people learned to speak these languages through interaction on the border between Brazil and Paraguay. Water floods the small space framed by the camera, creating noise and distortions in the speeches, until it completely interrupts them, and then we only hear the water dripping. It criticizes how the flooding on the border, for the construction of the Itaipu hydroelectric power plant in the 1980s, among many other socio-environmental impacts,

silenced voices. One of those voices was that of Salto das Sete Quedas waterfall in Paraná, whose sound of the waterfalls was considered sacred by the indigenous peoples.
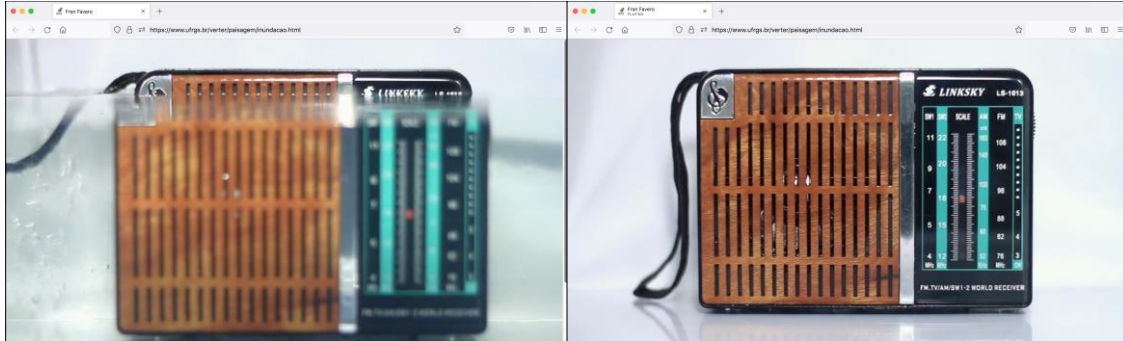

Figures 3 and 4: Favero, Fran. *Inundação* (2015). Views of the online exhibition. Source: Verter Platform, 2021.

Even before water interference, radio broadcast sound is not "clean". Radio broadcast recording has noises characteristic of the environment. Since Information Theory studies in the mid-twentieth century, communication models have not expected the absence of noise, as it is also part of the transmission. Even so, the notion of (and search for) the clearest broadcast channel possible is part of a dominant line in the ideal of technology. It would improve the perceived reality of content, but slow down broadcasting - since quality is directly proportional to the amount of data and hence file size; while faster broadcasting suggests file compression, fewer data, and thus poor quality. However, in the quest for better performance and noiseless messages, medium specificity seems to be precisely what remains, refusing to become transparent.

III

Cesar Baio developed the work *Padrões Anômalos - Estudo 1* based on a performance in which he repeats a walking pattern that deviates from the behavior of other pedestrians. Since the action takes place in a passageway, the flow is evident and linear. The artist walks at a pace very similar to that adopted by others, but changes direction and walks as if drawing a circuit within the camera frame. This is positioned from a top-down perspective, very close to an angle commonly used by security cameras, which allows us to see the patterns of movement (as well as brief encounters, hesitations, and interruptions) created in the flow.
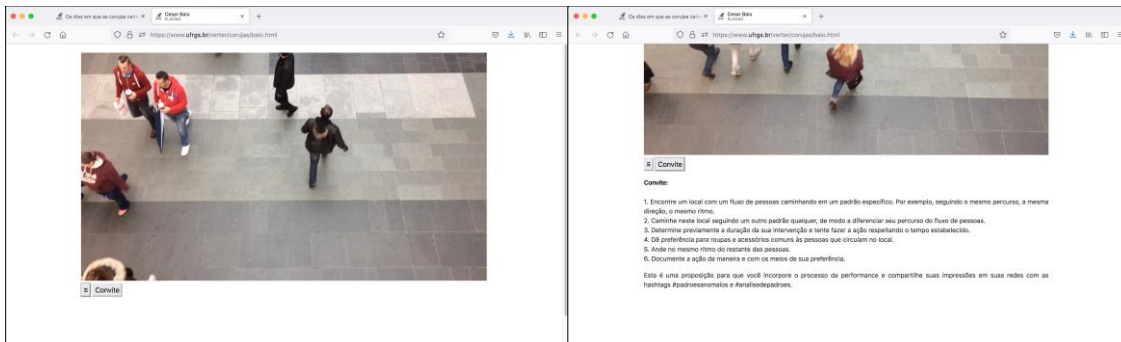
Figures 5 and 6: Baio, Cesar. *Padrões Anômalos - Estudo 1* (2019-2021). Views of the online exhibition. Source: Tedesco; Polidoro, 2022.

In the online exhibition, the page consists of the video of the performance and, below, two buttons that give access to (1) the text in which Baio reports a conversation he had with security guards at the site when they questioned him about what he was doing; and (2) the invitation for others to also perform the action, recording and sharing it. The fact that the artist was approached and questioned about the action tells us that a breaking of the pattern was noticed by those who are responsible for keeping things running at the site. Even without breaking any explicit rules, what happens when an individual interrupts and acts outside the expected patterns? Can non-standardized behavior redefine the parameters of the system's operation? With this artistic proposition, we think about the apparatus beyond the machine and expand to social systems.

Failure/ Counter-ideology

We understand that art can take advantage of a counter-ideological experience when it produces something that distorts the ideology and perception of reality. It allows us to create a rift to see contradictions of meanings that structure expectations and cover the experience of reality. The uses of the concept of failure in the works mentioned configuring poetic strategies. The blocking of connection signal in *Ok/Cancel*, silencing of a radio device in *Inundação*, and disturbance of flow in *Padrões Anômalos - Estudo 1* only exist to the extent that they have a "proper" or expected functioning in two parallel spheres, that of the apparatus as a machine and the ideological. The following paragraphs will explore these interpretations.

Rosa Menkman (2011, p. 9) conceptualizes *a glitch* as a still unknown information flow disruption, which is perceived as an error or accident because it happens unexpectedly. The expected functionality of a certain system is thus interrupted (such as noise, failure, or accident). In an ideal operation, the apparatus (the media, the system) that is mediating the information should be as transparent as possible, so that the subject can concentrate on the information (as when we look at a photograph and believe in it as if we were seeing the thing/event itself). If something interrupts that flow, attention turns to the medium itself. We notice this outage, this gap as a distance: we were absorbed, immersed, and pushed out. Paul Valéry had already stated that instruments tend to disappear when their operation becomes automatic, and we only regain consciousness of them through their accidents (cited in Virilio, 2005, p. 19).

Such a perspective can approach what Paul Virilio claims to be a positive possibility of the accident, as it can reveal something about the operation that was previously unknown. In the same book, he takes up the idea (from Aristotle and Valéry) that the person who invents a technology also invents its accident. It can be said that, even though the development of technologies and efforts to innovate seek to solve previous problems and improve their operations, each new device brings with it its possibilities of error and breaches through which it can be subverted

This thought seems to propose that a purposeful action to generate a failure is precisely the knowledge of the apparatus with which it will interfere - and it can itself indicate how to be corrupted. That is the case of the work of Elias Maroso, in which to interrupt waves from the carrier, the device itself must emit signals that occupy the same radio frequency used by the smartphone to hinder the reception of data from the carrier. In Fran Favero's work, the relationship is different and is built more like a metaphor since the artist takes up an element that was in some way silenced by the hydroelectric plant (water) and uses it to silence the radio (speech). Finally, Cesar Baio provokes a strangeness by creating an anomaly in the pattern of pedestrians.

The first two works presented interfere with the functioning of the media, hindering the transmission of information. The failure caused by the artists draws attention to the physical functioning of the machines, but also the ideological and cultural implications - let us not forget that no technique or medium is neutral. This is how they also approach the third artistic proposition analyzed here, in which the interference does not occur in a machine, but in a system, its flow and rhythm. Art is a way of understanding the current world and allows for creative experiences with media that go beyond their previous programming.

Another relationship is established between the works of Elias Maroso and Cesar Baio, since both address a possibility to visitors: when Maroso opts for the tutorial format for the video that is part of his proposition, inserting it on a platform like YouTube, he is making "the recipe" available for other people to produce a similar device for individual use. Cesar Baio's invitation, on

the other hand, presents itself as instructions for performance and suggests the subsequent sharing of the results. On this aspect, the fact that the works are exposed on the internet, exploring the characteristics of the computer network, significantly expands the reach of these addresses, since they can be accessed simultaneously anywhere in the world, just requiring a device with a connection.

Closing remarks

The relationships established among the artistic propositions *Ok/Cancel*, by Elias Maroso; *Inundação*, by Fran Favero; and *Padrões Anômalos - Estudo 1*, by Cesar Baio, were the provocateurs of this text. We noticed that, in each of these works, in their way, there were conflicts that could be discussed based on the association between the concepts of apparatus and ideology, and between failure and counter-ideology.

Thus, when we approach the concepts of ideology and apparatus, we also approach those of failure and counter-ideology. There is an ideal element in counter-ideology that dialogues within the tension between 'what is' and 'what should be'. It is not enough to seek refuge in the real, in the crude understanding of arbitrariness. According to Žižek (1996), a nihilistic criticism of ideology can trigger a cynical reaction. In this sense, either the denunciation of ideology exposes a contradiction in meanings as the basis for its overcoming, or the experience is regressive and tends towards the unveiling of arbitrariness as elemental.

If a *glitch* represents a loss of control (Menkman, 2011, p. 32), could causing an error or a failure in the apparatus be a way of taking control? Or, at least, could it be an inversion or a temporary interruption in the flow of power? At the very least, it presents itself as a generating force, a creator. At this point, we return to Flusser, who states that "freedom is playing against the apparatus" (2002, p. 75) and that "it is necessary to use the apparatus against its programs" (2008, p. 34). It is about being aware of the apparatus to perceive, in its different dimensions, some of its automatisms and the imposed conditions, and thus create tactics to play against them, deceive them to insert unforeseen elements, and subject them to human intentions

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