
INSERTIONS INTO IDEOLOGICAL CIRCUITS, 1970–75

CILDO MEIRELES

Extracts from artist's notes on *Insertions into Ideological Circuits* (1970) and an interview with Antônio Manuel (1975) from Gerardo Mosquera (ed.), *Cildo Meireles*, London: Phaidon, 1999.

I — Between 1968 and 1970 I knew I was beginning to touch on something interesting. I was no longer working with metaphorical representations of situations; I was working with the real situation itself. Furthermore, the kind of work I was making had what could be described as a 'volatilised' form. It no longer referred to the cult of the isolated object; it existed in terms of what it could spark off in the body of society. This was what one had in one's head at that time: the necessity to work with the idea of the public. Many Brazilian artists were including everyday materials and actions in their work; directing the work towards a large, indefinite number of people: what is called the public.

Today there is the danger of making work knowing exactly who will be interested in it. The idea of the public, which is a broad, generous notion, has been replaced, through a process of deformation, by the idea of the consumer, that section of the public which has acquisitive power. The *Insertions into Ideological Circuits* arose out of the need to create a system for the circulation and exchange of information that did not depend on any kind of centralised control. This would be a form of language, a system essentially opposed to the media of press, radio and television – typical examples of media that actually reach an enormous audience, but in the circulation systems of which there is always a degree of control and channelling of the information inserted. In other words, in those media the 'insertion' is performed by an elite that has access to the levels on which the system is developed: technological sophistication involving huge amounts of money and/or power.

The *Insertions into Ideological Circuits* took shape as two projects: the *Coca-Cola Project* and the *Cédula Project* with banknotes. The work began with a text I wrote in April 1970 which sets out this position:

1. In society there are certain mechanisms for circulation (circuits).
2. These circuits clearly embody the ideology of the producer, but at the same time they are passive when they receive insertions into their circuits.

3. This occurs whenever people initiate the circuits.

The *Insertions into Ideological Circuits* also arose from the recognition of two fairly common practices: chain letters (letters you receive, copy and send on to other people) and messages in bottles, flung into the sea by victims of shipwrecks. Implicit in these practices is the notion of a circulating medium, a notion crystallised most clearly in the case of paper money and, metaphorically, in returnable containers (soft drink bottles, for example).

As I see it, the important thing in the project was the introduction of the concept of 'circuit', isolating it and fixing it. It is this concept that determines the dialectical content of the work, while interfering with each and every effort contained within the very essence of the process (the medium). In other words, the container always carries with it an ideology. My initial idea was based on the recognition of a 'circuit' that naturally exists. An 'insertion' into this circuit is always a form of counter-information.

An insertion capitalises on the sophistication of the medium in order to achieve an increase in equality of access to mass communication. Additionally, it brings about a transformation of the original ideological propaganda inherent in the circuit – whether produced by industry or by the state. The effect of this ideological circuit is like an anaesthetisation of public consciousness. The process of insertion thus contrasts awareness (a result of the insertion) with anaesthesia (the property of the existing circuit). Awareness is seen as a function of art and anaesthesia as a product of the alienation inherent in industrialised capitalism.

Art, of course, has a social function and has more ways than industry of creating a greater density of awareness in relation to the society from which it emerges. The role of industry is exactly the opposite of this. As it exists today, the power of industry is based on the greatest possible coefficient of alienation. ...

A transaction occurs in the plastic arts which is based either on the mystique of the work in itself or the mystique of its author; or it moves towards the mystique of the market – the game of ownership and exchange value. Strictly speaking, none of these aspects should take priority. As soon as distinctions start to be made in one direction or another, a further distinction emerges between those who can make art and those who cannot. The way I conceived it, the *Insertions* would only exist to the extent that they ceased to be the work of just one person. The work only exists to the extent that other people participate in it. What also arises is the need for anonymity. By extension, the question of anonymity involves the question of ownership. When the object of art becomes a practice, it becomes something over which you can have no control or ownership. Furthermore, to the extent that you no longer need to go to the information (because the information comes to you) the right conditions are created for 'exploding' the notion of a *sacred space*. ...

In so far as museums and galleries form a sacred space for representation, they become like the Bermuda Triangle: anything you put there, any idea, is automatically sucked in and neutralised by the context of display. I think art tries primarily to make a commitment with the public; not with the purchaser of art (the market), but with the audience sitting out there in the stalls. The shadowy presence of this envisaged audience is the most important element in the whole endeavour. One works with the possibility (that the plastic arts provide) of creating a new language to express each new idea. Always one works with the possibility of transgressing reality, to make works that do not simply exist in an approved, consecrated, sacred space: that do not happen simply in terms of a canvas, a surface, a representation. No longer working with the metaphor of gunpowder, one uses gunpowder itself. No longer concerned with the object, one is left with a practice, over which there can be no control or ownership. ...

II — When Marcel Duchamp stated that his aim was to free art from the dominion of the hand, he could not foresee the point art would reach by 1970, with the development of Conceptualism. The source of art (in the handmade, which, at the time Duchamp was writing, could be located easily and effectively combated) has now been displaced from the hand to the brain – an area that is harder to access and apprehend.

Today, Duchamp's phrase reminds us of a lesson that has still not been learned. Duchamp fought not so much against the dominion of the hand as against the *process* of manual craftsmanship; against the gradual emotional, rational and psychological lethargy that habitual, mechanical labour inevitably produces in the individual. The struggle today should be not against the handmade but against its logic.

The fact that one's hands are not soiled with art means nothing except that one's hands are clean. Yet what one sees in much current conceptually-based art is simply relief and delight at not using one's hands, as if everything were finally alright; as if at this specific moment artists did not need to start fighting against a much larger opponent: the habits and handiwork of the brain.

Style, whether derived from the hands or the brain (reason), is an anomaly. It is more intelligent to abort such anomalies than help them to survive.

Art-Culture

Duchamp's intervention in the art system was in terms of the logic of the art object. Any intervention in this sphere today – given that culture, rather than an exclusive sphere of art, is now the subject – is necessarily a political intervention. For if aesthetics is the basis of art, politics is the basis of culture.

III—

1. Insertions into circuits.
2. Insertions into ideological circuits.

The readymade: a closed-circuit television, broadcasting messages about enigmas in the world.

Insertions

Science devotes itself to the study of static phases of phenomena. With this knowledge it seeks to categorise and determine these phenomena. However, science can only begin to understand these phenomena fully by coming face-to-face with them – adopting the same viewpoint as the phenomena themselves. To explain by analogy: we can learn virtually nothing about a film if the only knowledge we have of it is random, isolated, individual frames.

In the action of insertion it is velocity that specifically interests me. Here it is a matter of verifying the actual speed of the process.

Circuits

Referential system, circulation, range.

Awareness within anaesthesia.

The need for a new kind of behaviour that is also critical:
a natural imposition.

Translated interpretations that cease to have any importance
when interpretations are no longer made like works.

The theme becomes raw material.

Marcel Duchamp's readymades begin to indicate this anaesthesia
but do not act on it.

They can be considered art objects.

Criticism can only breathe if it understands the following:

1. It is not dependent upon any other activity but upon
a different level of focus on the same problem.
2. In any race where the artist is the driver, the technical team
are the hot-rods.
3. The problem may be one of immersion, rising or expansion.
4. The problem may be of a philosophical or a didactic nature.
5. To survive the problems consequent upon its own process of
historical development, criticism must be more lucid and
wide-ranging, less meta-critical.
6. The circulation of coins (ideology)
Static industrial products (ideological circuits)
Periodicals, magazines (ideological circuits)
Radio, television, cinema (ideological circuits)

Insertion into Existing Circuits

...The opposite of readymades. Also the opposite of what André Breton proposed (putting into circulation enigmatic objects that derive from dreams), because Breton never concerned himself with the kinds of circuits involved, predominantly referring to the so-called art circuit, which is today perfectly dispensable.

The first step: to replace the notion of a market with that of the public.

The need for a market, and progressive concern about it, leads today's Brazilian artists into committing increasingly serious errors:

1. Slavish dependence on a model with colonialist characteristics which is in its death-throes.
2. Discrimination towards the public.
3. Thematic pretence, where denunciation of violence gives rise to a delicate tragic farce, or inconsequential immersion in landscape, or passive, closet intellectualism.
4. A sad connivance with the constituted powers.
5. Creative anaesthesia.
6. A shameful ideological betrayal of the majority of Brazilians.

Where the notion of fraternal sharing of information and culture is replaced by that of the empowered consumer, an attitude of playing emerges; in these conditions the most that can be achieved is a model that already exists, known and recognisably reactionary. If the history of the plastic arts is the history of the bourgeoisie itself, it is no mere coincidence that the Renaissance is now seen historically as a proto-bourgeois revolution. In Brazil today, one can observe the model of the artist-marchand – a relationship of production, distribution and consumption. This system is founded on the systematic favouring of the individual who purchases, invests and creates humiliating conditions for those who produce. However, today artists can direct their creative abilities towards acquiring (shaping) a behaviour that focuses on:

1. Exploiting no one; allowing no one to exploit oneself.
2. Having nothing. Nothing to lose.

In other words, incorporating into the production process 60 to 70 percent of the reality that surrounds us.

This is not romanticism. The current economic reality of our planet explodes the ideological mystique of the artist ...



Cildo Meireles *Insertions into Ideological Circuits:*
Cédula Project, 1970
 Rubber stamp on banknotes

Zero Dollar, 1978–84
Litho offset on paper
 Courtesy the artist and Galleria Luisa Strina