

## **The Pink Popcorn: artists, theories and the creation of a "social field of art"**

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### *Short Abstract*

By exploring an art work entitled PIPOCA ROSA made in Brazil in the early 2000s, this paper discusses how Bourdieu's idea of "social field" came into play throughout the creation and circulation of the art work in question.

### *Abstract*

This paper intends to give an ethnographic account of an art work entitled PIPOCA ROSA ("Pink Popcorn"), produced by a group of artists who worked and lived in the Brazilian city of Curitiba in the early 2000s. By taking this specific example into account, the aim is to discuss the fact that contemporary art is informed by social theories and to reflect on the role they play in the image of the actors within the territory of contemporary art in the production and circulation of art. I argue that these artists and other art agents theorize about contemporary visual art based on Bourdieu's idea of "social field", a perspective which provides them with a vision of their relations to other actors that greatly affects the way they produce and circulate their own art work. Thus, such works do not reveal the boundaries of an already existing and defined social field, but rather produce it through the circulation of objects and people; and tension the distance and the relationship between social theories and thought schemes of the people that these theories refer to.

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The following paper is an ethnographic/reflexive exercise on a central methodological and analytical factor on the study of the territory of contemporary art: how to comprehend a research universe where its academics and scholars have social theories regarding their own territory, which are very close to the analyses carried out by the social sciences and with whom we share bibliographical references?

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“In the morning of November 28th, something literally sweet stirred Curitiba’s visual arts scene. Ten thousand popcorn bags were left in front of the city’s main art institutions. A few days prior, around 200 bags had been sent to artists in Paraná and other Brazilian states. Museums in Berlin, New York’s MoMA, and other renowned artists also received this simple and anonymous bag of sweet popcorn (Marcos Zibordi, *Gazeta do Povo* newspaper, 2000)

The performance<sup>2</sup> described above happened in 2000, in the city of Curitiba, the capital of the state of Paraná – southern Brazil – and became known as *Pipoca Rosa* (Pink Popcorn). A group of students from the Visual Arts course in the Federal University of Paraná claimed the authorship for this act a few days after its performance. The journalistic narrative above presents two stages of the work: in the first stage, two hundred visual arts agents (such as critics, researchers, artists, curators) received yellow envelopes in the mail with no return address, containing a single bag of sweet pink popcorn<sup>3</sup>; in the second stage, ten thousand bags of the sweet popcorn were placed on the doorsteps of institutions directly related to visual arts.

In the performance’s first stage, the anonymous packages received by these various recipients generated a network of talk and speculation. Who could the sender be? What was this all

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2 The term performance is often used by the specialized literature to refer to *Pipoca Rosa*. To mention one example, its entry on the Museu Virtual webpage: [http://www.muvi.advant.com.br/artistas/l/lilian\\_gassen/pipoca\\_rosa.htm](http://www.muvi.advant.com.br/artistas/l/lilian_gassen/pipoca_rosa.htm) – where it is possible to access some images of the action; the catalog for the *O Corpo na Cidade* exhibit is available at <http://www.ocorponacidade.com.br/catalogo.pdf>; and the book *Performance nas Artes Visuais*, by Regina Melin (2008).

3 An industrialized sweet popcorn, of the hominy variety, whose package is made out of pink plastic (due to its cheap price it is fairly popular in the region, especially among children, where the action took place).

about? Could it be an advertising campaign by the manufacturing company and/or candy distributor? Was it safe to open an anonymous package with a suspicious volume inside? Was the candy edible? For the performance's second moment, thousands of popcorn bags were placed in front of these art institutions in order to form pink piles, which led to a great ruckus among the museum's staff and usual visitors. The institutions affected by the act began to exchange information amongst them regarding the event and to warn other non-affected institutions of the possibility of the same outcome. The popcorn piles also caught the attention of bystanders. Many of them came closer in order to get some of the candy, accessing a space in a non-usual form and that not all people understood as a museum – in fact, what exactly is a museum? –, and specially as a place associated with the visual arts. Other people wondered whether the popcorn was freely available to all and whether they could eat them. Had perhaps a truck transporting the popcorn overturned nearby?<sup>4</sup>

There was also what could be considered as a third moment of the act: the artists involved in the performance gave an interview to *Gazeta do Povo* – the major local daily newspaper – where they talked about their work and assumed the authorship for the performance. By doing so, this group of art students – whose members work within the territory of visual arts – became known as Pipoca Rosa. Their names travelled through the talk network of visual arts, a process already engendered by the previous moments of their act and in which – due to the prominence of the newspaper where they promoted the authorship of their work – the group further broadened the extension of these networks.

With a small interpretive effort and a symmetrization exercise between the popcorn bags and the group, I suggest that the *pipocas* (a term sometimes used by the visual art actors in reference to the group's members)<sup>5</sup> placed themselves in front of these art institutions and forwarded themselves

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4 The present narrative on *Pipoca Rosa* was constructed by the use of documental sources, texts on the performance, interviews and informal conversations with the actors (artists and audience) involved.

5 I am using *Pipoca Rosa* in italics as so to refer to the performance, and Pipoca Rose without italics to refer to the group of performers, comprised of Lilian Gassen, Livia Piantavini, Otávio Roesner, Raíza Carvalho and Tony Camargo. Pipoca Rosa started as a study group whose main goal was to discuss and to promote the artistic production of its members. The *Pipoca Rosa* performance was the only work performed and signed as a group, even though Pipoca Rosa has done a few collective exhibits containing individual works by its members.

by mail to a large number of people who constitute the territory of visual arts. That is, the pipocas made themselves visible and presented themselves – while artists – as actors in the visual arts. And they were recognized as such, as suggested by the work’s repercussion – which to this day is still being described, mentioned and narrated in specialized publications<sup>6</sup>



Source:

[www.muvi.advant.com.br/artistas/lilian\\_gassen/pipoca\\_rosa.htm](http://www.muvi.advant.com.br/artistas/lilian_gassen/pipoca_rosa.htm),  
last access in 24/07/2013

The *Pipoca Rosa* performance has occupied my thoughts in the last few years since, as I see it, it operationalizes Pierre Bourdieu’s concept of artistic field. At the risk of being somewhat simplistic, but opting to not excessively prolong this presentation, I recall that Bourdieu suggests that we should consider society as an imbrication of different social fields, such as the artistic, the

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<sup>6</sup> A few examples of such publications are mentioned in footnote 2. The specialized publications, such as catalogs, books, magazines, websites, are forms which are fundamental in the circulation of artists and their works in the effort to obtain recognition and legitimation. The performances can be partially characterized by their ephemeral nature, that is, since they are not constituted as objects, which are frequently durable are more or less capable of circulating in museums and collections and of being sold and bought (Glusberg 2003). Due to this ephemeral nature, images, books and narratives become more relevant when compared to art objects, taking into account the fact that, once performed, these works exist in the visual arts territory merely as registration, narrative and memory.

academic, the economic, the scientific field (to mention some of the social fields studied by the author). A field is a structured and structuring social space, relatively autonomous to other fields, with its own logic and rules. In this space of social interaction/relation, people are simultaneously united by more or less common practices and interests, and “exist in and through the differences that separate them” (Bourdieu 2007b: 58, 59). It is a “field of forces<sup>7</sup> that is inseparable to a struggle” (*ibid*: 63)

Specifically regarding the territory of art<sup>8</sup>, Bourdieu crafted the notion of artistic field in the mid-1970s (Wacquant 2005) in order to escape what he called a reductive short circuit that

considering the relationship between the social world and cultural works in the *reflex* logic, directly associates art works to the authors’ social characteristics (their social origin) or to the groups that make up for their real or supposed recipients and whose expectations supposedly attend [... attempt to] relate work to a worldview or social interests of a social class. In this situation, we presume that the understanding of an art work is to understand the world view of a social group, one that would be expressed through the artist, acting as a sort of psychic or medium.

(Bourdieu 2007b: 58 e 59 – emphasis by the author).

According to Loïc Wacquant<sup>9</sup>, the

analysis of cultural works in terms of field would imply three indispensable and closely related procedures. The first one would be to locate the artistic microcosms (literary, poetic, musical, etc.) within the “field of power”, that is, the web of institutions in which the economic, political and cultural powers roam and that the dominant class strives to maintain for itself [...]. The second moment of the field analysis consists of delineating a topology of the internal structure of the artistic field in order to unveil the structure of relations (of supremacy and subordination, distance and proximity, complementarity and antagonism) prevailing at a certain moment among agents and institutions – major and small artists, schools and magazines, saloons and tertulias, academia and galleries – competing for artistic legitimacy. [...] The third and last step involves the construction of social trajectories for the individuals competing within the field in such a way as to make visible the socially constructed disposition system (*habitus*) which guide its conducts and representations both inside and outside the artistic sphere. (Wacquant 2005: 118)

The architecture of the *Pipoca Rosa* performance demanded that its actors had in mind – at the very least – what Wacquant calls the “topology of the artistic field’s internal structure” as so to elect the institutions that would receive the piles of sweet popcorn; an understanding of the

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<sup>7</sup> According to Loïc Wacquant, a *field of forces* for Bourdieu refers to “a network of objective determinations that weigh on all those in its interior” (2005: 117)

<sup>8</sup> I thank anthropologist Allan Oliveira for his constant dialogue regarding Pierre Bourdieu’s field of art.

<sup>9</sup> Loïc Wacquant is a sociologist, student of Pierre Bourdieu, who wrote with the latter *An Invitation to Reflexive Sociology* in 1992 (published by The University of Chicago Press). He is also the author of *Pierre Bourdieu and Democratic Politics*, published in 2005 by Polity Press (Cambridge).

“structure of relations” in order to choose those who received the anonymous sweet popcorn package by mail; a science of the social schemes in the construction of artistic legitimacy by opting to end their anonymity by conceding an interview to a local newspaper. More than a notion of Curitiba’s contemporary art field, the performance shows a refined knowledge of its actors within the field to the point that they were able to produce not only an artistic action that dealt with the field in question, but also an action that used this very field as a medium<sup>10</sup> and that corroborated with the insertion of its actors in that field by producing, in some instances, recognition and legitimacy. Although the statements above may seem obvious, they deal with the fact that sociological theory is not restricted to the territory of human sciences and that its experts are not merely a specialized eye external to the researched territory. We know that the subjects of our research theorize about themselves and their social relations. And sometimes, as in the case in question, a social group’s internal theories and external social theories coincide. In the case of *Pipoca Rosa* and the field theory, this presence occurred not as a mere theory or analytical abstraction, but as something practical, operationalized and produced by its actors. In other words, native “theory and practice” could be mistaken for sociological theory.

As anthropologists we are aware – although it is always important to reaffirm this idea and to have it in mind – that the ones we research, just as ourselves (who specialize in others), make connections and have thought schemes by which they read and produce their social relations. Marilyn Strathern’s written production is inspiring in this sense. The author focuses on the seizure of such thought schemes and in their narrative productions and experimentations, nearing these distinct group schemes, putting them in perspective, one in relation to the other. By doing this, the author enables at least three distinct thought schemes on her theme of discussion, among which figure thought schemes of the anthropologists themselves. In this sense, anthropology symmetrizes not only what we call distinct culture (Western and non-Western), but also the anthropologists’ own culture. In this case, the cultures of others are not analyzed by the anthropological theoretical

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<sup>10</sup> By *medium* I am also referring to what could be also called the art work’s support of specific language (such as painting), which is – in this case – part of the raw material for the art work.

apparatus, but one through the other and relative to such apparatus. Moreover, more than merely collaborating with the construction of an anthropological theory, the culture of others places under scrutiny the anthropologists' own culture, anthropologists' own logic, constructions, images and thought schemes.<sup>11</sup>

Inspired by the work of Marlyn Strathern, as well as Bruno Latour and Woolgar (1997), on how certain ideas, once placed into the world, begin to act upon it, Anelis Riles' *The Network Inside Out* chooses an object that presents a very similar problematic to the one described in this paper's first paragraph: women's collaboration networks in Fiji, or more specifically, the different knowledge imbricated in its composition. Riles does not use the concept of network as something that is given, ready to be mapped out by the researcher, but as an image through which people conceive and act upon the world and, at the same time, does not precede the existence of actors: they need to constantly produce it so that it can exist; it is and needs to be continually invented (WAGNER 2010). Additionally, this image of the women's network in Fiji is intensely informed by theories on transnational networks developed by those that Riles calls modernists sociologists. Therefore, the network is at the same time an image of social sciences and a native image through which the actors in Anelis' research think and produce their territory.

I suggest that we think the idea of the artistic field in the same way that Riles works with the notion of network: as an image of the visual arts territory, common to not only the people in the visual arts territory, but also to social scientists, especially art sociologists. Among the works and references in social sciences that showed to be recurrent among visual art scholars, who belong to and who constitute this territory we find Pierre Bourdieu. Works such as *The Love of Art: European Art Museums and Their Public* (2003); *Rules of Art: Genesis and Structure of the Literary Field* (1996); *Distinction* (2007) and *The Economy of Symbolic Exchange* (2007), are part of an academic curriculum in visual art, with special attention to the first book mentioned – an education that a significant part of its actors receive. It was not rare for me to hear Bourdieu's work being mentioned on the course of this research, mainly regarding what art critic and scholar Artur Freitas described to

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<sup>11</sup> According to Catarina Morawska Vianna, personal communication.

me as being the institutional and social analysis of art – as opposed to, for example, the poetic analysis of art.<sup>12</sup>

From what I was able to learn, even though not everyone has direct access to Pierre Bourdieu's work and his conceptualizations on the artistic field – or to concepts such as habitus, intrinsically connected to the concept of field –, this sociological image informs the art territory by means of texts and a formal or informal rhetoric that pervade this universe. And this image of the field seems to be closely related to this field's production, by its visual art agents, as something that is not given, but that needs to be built, recognized, and to continually legitimate itself, as is the case for contemporary art itself – which is not defined by charted, fixed and tacitly accepted rules, but needs to be constantly negotiated and displayed<sup>13</sup>. The *Pipoca Rosa* performance not only points towards the existence of the field as an image in the visual arts, but it also reaffirms and produces the field from this image from the moment that it recognizes, maps, and acts upon it by encouraging relationships between those that are part of the field and the possibilities of including its actors within it.

Although this paper focused on Pierre Bourdieu's concept of field, other images inform the visual arts territory, such as the notion of world by Howard Becker (1982) and Arthur Danto (2006)<sup>14</sup>. There is still a lot of work to be done beyond the reflexive effort presented here, not only regarding concepts that have escaped this work, but also to the very concept of field – even though the reflection presented in this paper is a significant step in my research in regards to how to deal ethnographically with the concept of field without considering it as given and ready for analysis.

Specifically regarding the arts market, the subject that I work with in my doctoral research, I

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12 From what I was able to comprehend, institutional or social art analysis refers to art institutions, the social production of artists, and specific art works. Poetic analysis refers to the art work or the production of a single artist, and as to what makes the art object as such in a more formal perspective (in the sense of form), inter-aesthetic – even if we take into account, as put by Clifford Geertz, that a society's definition of art can only be marginally inter-aesthetic (2007: 146). After reading an article by Artur Freitas (2005) I understood that the division between an internal and external perspective in the analysis of an artwork has as one of its main references the philosopher Richard Wollheim. In the same article, Freitas defends a methodological division of historical art analysis in three dimensions: formal, semantic and social – a division I believe that does not demand to be detailed in this paper.

13 On this discussion, see *Artes visuais e seus fluxos: entre pessoas, objetos, falas, projetos e editais* (CORDOVA 2010).

14 The latter, according to Freitas (2005), being a concept even more popular than the one of field within the visual arts.

am faced with situations in which sociologists are hired to research this market by the Brazilian Art Gallery Association (ABACT) which, in turn, has as its main objective the promotion of this market. One of the challenges behind this research is to comprehend movements such as this one. The construction of an ethnography that is sensible to this present discussion seems to be the most promising path – even though the ethnographic method is not left unscathed from the territory of visual arts, which also utilizes/appropriates the production process of artworks, with the goal of self-analysis and self-description<sup>15</sup>.

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15 See *Seven days in the art world*, by Sara Thorthon (2011).

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