

The Collection of the Museum of Modern Art of Rio de Janeiro: experimental production and Cildo Meireles^I

Daniele Machado^{II} and Stefania Paiva^{III}

English version: Thais Medeiros^{IV}

Abstract: The fire in 1978 interrupted a remarkable relationship between MAM Rio and the avant-gardes, leaving a historical gap in the institution. Among the initiatives to redress this through the collection was a set of acquisitions that was made in 2001, which includes *Marulho*, by Cildo Meireles: how has it been managed since then?

Keywords: Museum of Modern Art of Rio de Janeiro; Collection management; Experimental Art; Cildo Meireles.

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II Doctoral student in Art History at the Postgraduate Program in Art History at the Universidade do Estado do Rio de Janeiro. Masters in Contemporary Art Studies at Universidade Federal Fluminense, Rio de Janeiro. Graduated in Art History at Universidade Federal do Rio de Janeiro. Scholarship from the Research Support Foundation Fundação de Amparo à Pesquisa do Estado do Rio de Janeiro. Student of Rio de Janeiro State University - R. São Francisco Xavier, 524 - Maracanã, Rio de Janeiro - RJ, 20550-013. São Francisco Xavier, 524 - Maracanã, Rio de Janeiro - RJ, 20943-000. E-mail: machadodani08@gmail.com. ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-0294-0472>. Lattes iD: <http://lattes.cnpq.br/6323087753244561>. Rio de Janeiro, Brazil.

III Doctoral student in Art History at the Postgraduate Program in Art History at the Universidade do Estado do Rio de Janeiro. Masters in Memory and Collections from the Postgraduate Program of Fundação Casa de Rui Barbosa. Graduated in Social Communication - Journalism, at the Rede de Ensino Doctum, Caratinga, Minas Gerais. Student of Rio de Janeiro State University - R. São Francisco Xavier, 524 - Maracanã, Rio de Janeiro - RJ, 20550-013. E-mail: tamanduaproducao@gmail.com. ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-9880-0051>. Lattes iD: <http://lattes.cnpq.br/6480442664973902>. Rio de Janeiro, Brazil.

IV Doctoral student in Visual Poetics at the Postgraduate Program in Visual Arts at the Universidade Federal do Rio de Janeiro (UFRJ). Masters in Visual Poetics at the Postgraduate Program in Visual Arts at the UFRJ. Graduated in Social Sciences – emphasis in Anthropology, at the Pontifícia Universidade Católica do Rio de Janeiro/ Universidade Nova de Lisboa. Student of Universidade Federal do Rio de Janeiro - Av. Pedro Calmon, 550, Rio de Janeiro - RJ, 21941-901. E-mail: thais.medeiros@gmail.com. ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-4004-402X>. Lattes ID: <http://lattes.cnpq.br/0953697062885121>. Rio de Janeiro, Brazil.

The present article and *O Museu de Arte Moderna do Rio de Janeiro, Maria Martins e a institucionalização da arte moderna no Brasil* (*The Modern Art Museum of Rio de Janeiro, Maria Martins and the institutionalization of modern art in Brazil*) were developed through a collective investigation which united four pieces of research about MAM Rio's Collection.

The text written by Emmanuele Russel and Gabriela Caspary analyzes the museum's first decade of existence and Maria Martins' role in this part of the institution's trajectory through various institutional documents, presenting information with little disclosure and allowing for a better understanding of the early history of MAM Rio.

This article focuses on examining a set of acquisitions made by MAM Rio in 2001, entitled *Aquisições Essenciais* (Essential Acquisitions), which presents artists related to the most valued moments in the institution's history. This action seeks the assessment of several professionals in the artistic area, related to the museum, and who were interviewed in 1980 about the history of the museum. It was established in the common imagination as a museum that collaborated with artistic production before an exhibition, working with the avant-gardes of each era something



Figure 1
Cildo Meireles
Marulho, 1991/1997
Installation, Wooden
ramp, books and
soundtrack,
18 x 20 x 7 m
Photo: Felipe Braga.
Artist's collection.

that ceased to exist in this sense after the fire that occurred in 1978. Given the temporal proximity, the avant-garde in evidence is often called “experimental” by interviewees and interviewers.

The interviews were carried out within the scope of the research project for the elaboration of the *Dossiê MAM* (MAM Dossier) in 1980, an initiative of the *Projeto ABC* (Brazilian Contemporary Art Project) of the Funarte (National Arts Foundation). MAM Rio became a case study to investigate the relationship between art and institutions in the country. However, the project suffered from several interruptions and, in the end, was not published. Only the interviews available at Funarte’s Documentation Center are presented here. Alfredo Herkenhoff, Deborah Danowski, Elisa Byington and Geraldo Carneiro interviewed: two former executive directors of MAM Rio, Heloisa Lustosa and Maurício Roberto; the former director of the museum’s Cinemateca, Cosme Alves Netto; three art critics, Ferreira Gullar, Ronaldo Brito and Wilson Coutinho; the artist Adriano de Aquino.

The interviews have in common that they all reference the closing of the “museum-laboratory”, the museum that collaborated with the artist beyond the exhibition, which, in the years prior to the fire, had as its apex in the so-called “experimental” production. In order to understand how the work of artists who were valued for being part of the museum’s experimental trajectory was managed after acquisition, this article discusses one of them: *Marulho*, by Cildo Meireles. The admission of the “experimental” nucleus, created by the curator of the museum at the time, Fernando Cocchiarale, and of which *Marulho* is a part, was an institutional effort to date this production in its collection and fulfill the historic duty to recover the respected program of the *Área Experimental*, the museum’s experimental area, closed by the fire. Such overlaps will be discussed here.

Avant-garde, Experimental, Laboratory

“The Museum of Modern Art in Rio de Janeiro is oriented toward the avant-garde and experimentation in the arts, cinema and culture” (MAM Rio, 2021). This is the first sentence today, in 2021, of the institutional definition of MAM Rio on the About page of its website. The carioca museum built an image of an institution open to the avant-garde, to the contemporary art of each era, anchored in part on the history it built in its first three decades of operation, a period crystallized and ended by the fire that occurred at the *Bloco de Exposições* (Exhibition Block) in 1978.

At the end of the 1960s, the museum was already marked by its commitment to a few of the avant-gardes of each era. This commitment went beyond exhibitions, which was a feature that distinguished it from other Brazilian museological institutions. In the previous decade, the institution had been marked by its involvement with the *Grupo Frente* and *Neo-Concrete* movements and by an educational program that covered different audiences, becoming a reference in the city of Rio de Janeiro as an alternative to the traditional education that was offered by the *Escola Nacional de Belas Artes* (National School of Fine Arts).¹

The museum became a meeting place, as the artists Wanda Pimentel and Antonio Manuel, respectively, highlight: “MAM had a canteen, and we used to meet there every day. We had conversations, talked about our work”; “MAM was where we shared our experiences, talked about our work. It was a place of exchange and reflection. Everyone gathered there”.²

During this period, Brazil was experiencing the first years of the civil-military dictatorship of 1964. The museum-vanguard articulation of the 1950s was accentuated by the cultural context imposed by the new political situation. As Fernanda Pequeno (2018) states, in the emblematic year of 1968 the museum did not hold any major exhibitions, in contrast to previous years. In counterpart, the “program” of the museum as a meeting place was radicalized, and “experimental” vocabulary began to proliferate.

In 1968 the event *Arte no Aterro: um mês de arte pública* (*Art in Aterro: a month of public art*) was organized by the art critic Frederico Morais, with sponsorship from the *Diário de Notícias* newspaper. It consisted of a month of exhibitions and classes in the Parque do Flamengo which encouraged the active participation of visitors. The event is often associated with MAM Rio, which did not collaborate in its organization, as pointed out by Fernanda Pequeno. Even so, the art historian states that the “event was a proposal for the outside area of the artistic institution, considering the Aterro do Flamengo as an extension of MAM Rio” (PEQUENO, 2018, p. 149).

1 Current EBA/ UFRJ (School of Fine Arts at the Federal University of Rio de Janeiro).

2 (Oral information) MANUEL, Antonio. [Testimony given to one of the authors]. Rio de Janeiro (artists studio), 12 set. 2017. (audio recording – 1hr 25min).

For Pequeno the event became a reference in the history of Brazilian art for presenting the “immediacy or short duration of artistic proposals” and for having sought “an approximation with the public”, characteristics that are “potentially critical to the established order, both in an artistic and institutional sense” (PEQUENO, 2018, p. 155). The researcher also places the event as a predecessor of the *Domingos da Criação* (*Creative Sundays*), also organized by Morais, in 1971, at MAM Rio.

For Fernanda Lopes, author of the book *Área Experimental: lugar, espaço e dimensão do experimental na arte brasileira dos anos 1970* (2013), there was, in this period, no consensual definition of what was “experimental” at MAM Rio, which could be seen as a strategy:

it was meant to keep that choice open. Not restricting the “experimental” to a single artistic proposal, such as video, painting, environmental art, drawing, or any other medium, brought as a challenge to think about how much experimentation painting, video, drawing, sculpture, installation etc. could have. No matter the medium, it would have to be critically rethought (LOPES, 2013, p. 49).

For the author, it was also a question of questioning artistic spaces, pressing for their expansion and reinvention. Lopes adds that, in the case of the *Área Experimental*, the artistic proposals were presented as projects in which risk was fundamental. Historically, the art critic points out that the experimental perception found in Neo-Concrete production, associated with phenomenology, multi-sensoriality, playfulness, is transformed with the social violence imposed by the dictatorship, seeming to

reconfigure themselves in more “aggressive” works, which raised questions not only about the limits of artistic categories and mediums, but also about the terms in which society and power systems were structured and functioned (LOPES, 2013, p. 51).

In the year following *Arte no Aterro*, MAM Rio staged the *Salão da Bússola*³, which brought to light the production of young Brazilian artists, presen-

³ The *Salão da Bússola* was held with the objective of commemorating the fifth anniversary of the Aroldo Araújo Advertising agency, its sponsor. The theme of the exhibition was chosen due to its fundamental importance for the “discovery of new paths, and for broadening horizons for humanity”, as described in the printed material of the 1st *Salão da Bússola* (1969). The *Salão* innovated by allowing the submission of works that did not fit into the traditional artistic categories, such as happenings and objects. This contributed to the submission of unusual works, considered, for the most part, “strange” and “a challenge to intelligence” by the jury, according to the article in the newspaper *Jornal do Brasil: Volume de trabalhos para Salão da Bússola no MAM desorienta até promotores* (Volume of works for the *Salão da Bússola* at MAM disorients even its promoters (1969). Likewise, the number of works registered: more than a thousand.

ting a new attitude that combined art production with social and political criticism, deepening experimental art investigation and the artist-public relationship. This group of artists, active since the late 1960s, was called “Generation AI-5” by Frederico Morais. Facing an art production inevitably affected by the political-social context, the critic writes:

In the conventional war of art, the participants had well-defined positions. There were artists, critics, and spectators. The critic, for example, judged, dictated norms of good behavior, saying that this was good and that bad, this valid, that not, limiting performance rules, defending artistic categories and genres, the so-called aesthetic, and specific values. And to this end, the established aesthetic (ethical) sanctions and rules. In the artistic guerrilla, however, everyone is a fighter and takes initiative. The artist, the audience and the critic continually change their positions in the event and the artist himself can be a victim of an ambush plotted by the spectator (MORAIS, 1975, p. 30).

Among the artists selected for the *Salão da Bússola* were: Cildo Meireles, Artur Barrio, Antonio Manuel, Carlos Vergara, Thereza Simões, Guilherme Magalhães Vaz, Luiz Alphonsus, Wanda Pimentel, Pedro Escosteguy, Anna Bella Geiger, Luciano Gusmão, Dilton Araújo, Lótus Lobo, Raimundo Colares and Ascânio MMM. Cildo was awarded first place, winning NCr\$6,000.00 and flights to the cities of London and New York, for the work *Nowhere is my home* (1969), a wooden environment created by the artist, which integrates the series *Cantos*.

In 1969, the art critic Frederico Morais also created the *Unidade Experimental* (Experimental Unit) at MAM Rio, together with Cildo Meireles, Guilherme Vaz and Luiz Alphonsus. Morais, at the time, stated what the proposal was about:

The activities and achievements of the *Unidade Experimental* will aim at the codification of new languages that include ways of thinking and forms of communication and information through all the senses (touch, smell, hearing, etc.) in a broader exploration of the ludic capacity of man, that is, an interdisciplinary research, in all areas, without any limitation of isms, canons, salons or school (MORAIS, 1969).

The excerpt above belongs to the text *Um Laboratório de Vanguarda*, written by Frederico Morais in the newspaper *Diário de Notícias*, in 1969. The article also mentioned interdisciplinarity as a way to prevent the risk of limiting itself to “isms”. As in any avant-garde saga, even more so in this case, in which the avant-garde is supported by an institution, assimilation and categorization did not take long to happen. The experimental streak at MAM Rio had the *Área Experimental* as its final episode and was ended by the fire of 1978. In 1980, when Funarte’s *Projeto ABC* started the unfin-

ished project of the *Dossiê MAM* (MAM Dossier), “experimental” art was already established in the discourse of the interviewees for the project.

MAM Dossier

In 1980, Funarte’s *Projeto ABC* began the production of the *Dossiê MAM*, with the aim of filling a historical gap in the studies of the relationship between art and art institutions in Brazil using MAM as a case study. The dossier was neither completed nor published. Among the research material that was produced, there is, at the Funarte Documentation Center, a set of seven interviews that discuss the fire at the institution in 1978 and the administrations prior to that event.

Alfredo Herkenhoff, Deborah Danowski, Elisa Byington and Geraldo Carneiro interviewed personalities with different profiles in the artistic field: the former executive directors of MAM Rio, Maurício Roberto, an architect who directed the institution from 1967 to 1972, and Heloisa Lustosa, a philosopher who worked in that same position from 1972 to 1979; Cosme Alves Netto, who was the director of the museum’s Cinematheque between 1965 and 1989.

In addition to the three managers, who directly influenced the course of the museum, there are, among those interviewed, three art critics: Ronaldo Brito, who worked in the management of the museum’s art program during the period of Lustosa’s direction; Ferreira Gullar, who was part of Neo-Concretism, the movement that had great support from MAM Rio; Wilson Coutinho, who became involved with the institution in a project to create courses that was ultimately not realized. Finally, we have the artist Adriano de Aquino, former president of the *Associação Brasileira de Artistas Plásticos* (Brazilian Association of Visual Artists), whose works were destroyed in the fire.

When assessing the material, in order to understand what material and symbolic losses were generated and felt due to the fire, there is a striking discrepancy in the mentions of the collection and the programming. The collection is not highlighted in any of the seven interviews, despite being the sector of the museum most affected by the fire. The programming, on the other hand, appears frequently in all interviews, especially the one focused on experimental art. This was not associated with the collection, rather treated as an opposition to the idea of a museum collection.

In the interview with the poet and art critic Ferreira Gullar, the collection does not become a topic of conversation. As a member of the former *Neo-Concrete* movement, he was asked about the assimilation of these avant-gardes by the museum and replied:

In this sense, the Museum was open (...) the Museum opened its doors to our movement at a time when it was quite combative, people even tried to ridicule it (...) [about the first *Neo-Concrete* exhibition, 1959] the Museum attended the exhibition, opened the exhibition, opened its doors, gave everything it could (...) In this sense, the Museum always played an avant-garde role, within the conditions of the time (GULLAR, 1980, p. 4 - 5).

Although the defense of interdisciplinarity of the museum is present in all interviews and experimental proposals, the *Cinematoteca* and the cinematographic collection of MAM Rio are only mentioned by the former director of the museum's cinematheque. As for the losses generated by the fire, Cosme Alves Netto was assertive in distinguishing two forces acting in the institution:

The museum that caught fire was not the cultural-proposal-museum (...) because it really wasn't about paintings, walls, but the one of popular expression (...) The museum is frightening (...) it looks like a kind of temple, where only those who are initiated can enter. So, they were trying to break this down (...) On the one hand, by making these people enter the museum. On the other hand, trying to create the museum as a project, as a plan, that would come out and go to the square. It was this experience that was destroyed (...) I think there are two museums, one was destroyed by the fire and the other was destroyed by the fear of the ruling elite that did not accept the continuity of that proposal (NETTO, 1980, p. 6 - 7).

Although MAM Rio is a museological institution, it is remarkable that all interviewees understood that the museum's core activity was its program of activities. The former executive director of the museum, Heloisa Lustosa, mentioned that 60% of the budget for cultural programming at MAM Rio, before the fire, was invested in the *Área Experimental*, with the justification that the project provided for the continuity of the production of young artists, not yet assimilated in the commercial circuit.

Lustosa also addressed her concerns about the rebuilding after the fire, which represented, for her, an opportunity to adapt the MAM Rio headquarters to the old deficiencies: welcoming experimental production. It is intriguing that, after a fire, the former executive director of the institution did not mention that the technical reserve was also an old problem in the structure of the building, something which can be understood in her own interview, when she points out that the absence of technicians specialized in the demands of a museum was a problem since its foundation.

Niomar Moniz Sodré and Assis Chateaubriand, both made use of the press to promote the institutions they were undertaking, with the difference that *Diários Associados* invested in the construction of the MASP collection, while *Correio da Manhã* invested in the construction of the MAM Rio building, for the happiness of Rio de Janeiro (...) She thought about the structure, not the content (ROBERTO, 1980, p. 2).

Maurício Roberto, an architect and another former executive director of the museum who was interviewed, explains the perception mentioned above. But the excerpt also confirms the interest of MAM Rio to be more associated with the programming and promotion of encounters rather than to the collection. Maurício also mentions a recent historical awareness of the institution, which at that time had just decided to create a Documentation Institute for the museum.

The opposition between the collection and programming is fierce in interviews with the artist Adriano de Aquino and the art critics Ronaldo Brito and Wilson Coutinho. For Aquino, the museum should not be a “depository of works”, but rather

a dynamic thing, something that produces, at the same time makes, transforms that kind of thing into heritage, that kind of production through a heritage, through its registration or through its documentation center through the registration of events (AQUINO, 1980, p. 30).

For the artist, the kinds of activities described above would lead the institution to stop being a museum and become an art center. In a very incisive tone, Aquino contrasts the “living museum” with the “collection museum” and the “didactic museum”. For the artist, through the inclusion of the artistic class in the museum’s decision making structure, it would become a center of contemporary production, “a very specific territory on issues of contemporary production”. And this desired museum would require other management parameters. In this sense, “the question of the competence of the museum of the past is very relativized” (AQUINO, 1980, p. 32).

For the art critic Wilson Coutinho, the collection would have the function of contemplating productions outside the experimental spectrum,

works that are no longer in this space, works that have come full circle and works that would be located within the Museum’s collection. I can not imagine Volpi now making experimental art. I think the collection should have a work by Volpi (COUTINHO, 1980, p. 6).

The main function of the museum should be the promotion of material conditions for contemporary production, which would bring vitality to the

institution. In his words, the museum would no longer

be a mere depository of works – the collection is important. I always emphasize that this pedagogy of the public eye must be, must be institutionalized there. But it is this dynamic of the museum that must be thought of as a primordial element (COUTINHO, 1980, p. 7).

Coutinho states that such a transformation would also imply the definition of the institution, which would cease to be a museum and become a “center of production” (COUTINHO, 1980, p. 7).

Ronaldo Brito chaired the Cultural Commission, together with Roberto Pontual, head of the museum’s exhibition department, and Heloísa Lustosa, the executive director at the time, deliberating on the programming of MAM Rio in the years prior to the fire. The art critic, when reporting this concern, reinforced that he expressly defended contemporary production, despite having been led to take a stand in relation to other kinds of production.

When asked what the most striking thing about MAM in light of the market’s rejection of the production was promoted by the *Área Experimental*, Brito replied that the museum was

in the position of a gallery, in a certain sense also in the position of a space open to interventions by the artists themselves who would have normally or traditionally held exhibitions in other spaces that are not the space already marked by the consecration of the museum. So, it was characterized precisely by this ambiguous space, of being at the same time sacralizing and a vehicle for products from the immediate market, whilst innovative insofar as it allowed artists to associate themselves with it (BRITO, 1980, p. 11).

Brito disagrees with Aquino and Coutinho with his understanding that the demand of artists to participate in the museum’s decisions would not solve its weaknesses, but only a “technical management” would, guided by a “technical rationality”. In common between the three, there is an agreement that the focus of the museum should be on Brazilian contemporary artistic production, which, Ronaldo Brito emphasizes, would not be just experimental.

The two critics and the artist do not associate experimental art with the collection of works, but with documentation, the institution’s archive - a fact that can be understood due to the recent relations, in the early 1980’s, in Brazil, between base works, mediums and non-traditional materials, the market and the collection. The concern arises in terms of memory.

Adriano de Aquino and Wilson Coutinho believe that contemporary works – in their words: experiences, events, and happenings – should be established as heritage through registration or documental production. Brito goes further, stating that a “contemporary institutional rationale” should be built for this type of work, which would break with tradition:

There is no longer any reason to have Fine Arts hoarding those things for an eternity that only exists in those people’s heads. The world of today is not only not eternal, but also the world of the minute (BRITO, 1980, p. 13).

Experimental Nucleus: *Marulho*

I would like to hear you talk about that moment at MAM, in the late 60s, early 70s, about that effervescence. Why was MAM one of the places that hosted those experiments? For you, why MAM? And why was this so strong? (GOGAN, 2017, p. 20)

Why not MAM? What happened was that the development of political life in Brazil, the squeeze of the dictatorship and the lack of freedom, ended up strangling the MAM. Today, unfortunately, it is a museum that does not open up as wide as it did back then. So, when you ask why MAM? Because it was a natural place for such an event. A large, empty, beautiful space, capable of gathering a lot of people, a place where freedom was breathed, the best moments, the best things from Brazilian art were on display at the MAM. The MAM was a living organism, it was a museum as a museum should be, not a sarcophagus where eternally mummified masterpieces are buried. So that is why it is yes MAM. The question is why not MAM now? Where did that go? Where did they get lost? I am a son of this other MAM (HADDAD, 2017, p. 20).

The recent publication *Domingos da criação: uma coleção poética do experimental em arte e educação* (2017), by the researcher Jessica Gogan, with the collaboration of Frederico Moraes, investigates this famous event at MAM Rio and the atmosphere of progress with the establishment of the “experimental program” at the Museum. The excerpts mentioned above, which are part of Gogan’s interview with actor Amir Haddad, allow us to verify that the link between the museum’s history and the avant-gardes remains in the imagination of the cultural field.

A historically privileged place of the avant-garde and experimentalism in the country, the Museum of Modern Art of Rio de Janeiro saw the birth of a considerable part of our aesthetic movements and launched many of our most important artists. From *Grupo Frente* (1954), formed from Ivan Serpa’s first adult class at MAM to Neo-Concretism (1959); from *Atelier de Gravura* (1959) to *Nova Objetividade Brasileira* (1967), passing through *Opinião 65* and *Opinião 66*; from the *Resumo JB* exhibitions (1964-1972), to the *Salões de Verão* (1969-1974); from *Domingos da Criação* (1971) to the *Área Experimental* (1975-1976), until the tragic fire of 1978, countless events and artists were present at MAM, or had a fundamental reference in it for the flourishing of their works. However, whether due to the destruction caused by

fire or the lack of specific resources for the acquisition of works, its collection, despite the efforts made so far, still does not reflect the cutting-edge history of modern and contemporary Brazilian art, whose privileged cradle has always been the museum itself (COCCHIARALE, 2001).

In 2001, with sponsorship from Petrobras, MAM Rio developed the *Aquisições Essenciais* project with the objective of incorporating into its collection a set of 16 works by the artists Cildo Meireles, Antonio Manuel, Artur Barrio, Carlos Zilio, Décio Vieira, Hélio Oiticica, Ivan Serpa and Waltércio Caldas. The excerpt mentioned above is from the presentation by the museum's curator at the time, Fernando Cocchiarele, for the exhibition that presented the new works from the institution's collection to the public.

The curator's words show a concern to strengthen the historical character of the institution and its relationship with the production of the main Brazilian artists. More than two decades after the fire, it was still institutionally understood as an interruption, either from the collection consumed by the flames, or from the programming, especially the experimental one, which had not been included in the collection before 1978.

The project of new acquisitions permeates MAM Rio's relationship with the avant-gardes of each era, defining the institution as a mandatory reference in studies on these productions in the history of Brazilian art. It was the beginning of the institution's commitment to the historic duty of restoring the gaps left by the fire. Such concern is expressed in the emphasis given to the production of artists who integrated these important movements in the structure of the collection:

We seek to reinforce two fundamental periods of Brazilian art in our collection: Grupo Frente, Neo-Concretism (Décio Vieira, Hélio Oiticica and Ivan Serpa) and experimentalism (Antonio Manuel, Artur Barrio, Carlos Zilio, Cildo Meireles and Waltércio Caldas) (COCCHIARALE, 2001).

However, there are weaknesses that should be highlighted in the articulation of acquisitions with the discourse that justified them. While the acquisitions seemed to try to fill a historical gap, in the case of experimentalism, it is noted that most of the works incorporated into the collection correspond to recent productions by these artists and, therefore, do not reflect the phase in which they were connected to the context of MAM Rio. *Fantasma*, by Antonio Manuel, for example, is from 1994; the painting *Sem Título*, by Carlos Zilio, is from 1999; the installation *Ping-Ping*, by Waltércio Caldas, is from 1980. The installation *Marulho*, by Cildo Meireles, is from 1991.

Fantasma, by Antonio Manuel, is an installation whose title alludes to a photograph of a survivor of the massacre in Vigário Geral, who, after being revealed by the press, “had to hide, losing his identity, transforming himself into a ghost⁴”. The work was presented for the first time at the *Fórum de Artes Plásticas de Brasília*, in 1994. The following year, the artist assembled an expanded version of the work at the invitation of the Brazil-United States Institute (IBEU).

The installation consists of about nine pieces of burnt wood entangled in wire and bound in an imperceptible grid. The irregular lumps of coal are apparently floating at varying heights. On the other side, encouraging the visitor to cross the barrier, there is a photograph of a person with his head covered by a white cloth and surrounded by news crew microphones, lit by suspended lanterns. To reach the image, the visitor passes through this tortuous space, avoiding the coals, suggesting an individual way of moving along the path.

The installation *Ping-Ping*, by Waltércio Caldas, was presented at Galeria Saramenha, in Rio de Janeiro, in 1980. The exhibition was accompanied by a catalog featuring a graphic essay and a poem, both authored by the artist himself. *Ping-Ping* is one of the first installations by Waltércio Caldas, whose production until then was focused on other media such as drawings, objects and sculptures, boxes, and books.

The work presents a suspended ping-pong game, whose table is hung horizontally on the wall and, in front of it suspended in the air, a ball, a net with a circular hole, a racket with an identical hole and a pair of glasses for the blind person, all black plastic, without lenses. The frozen game scene seems to twist space from the position of objects that float before the eye.

The acquisition by Cildo Meireles was *Marulho* (1991), an installation composed of wood, fabrics, books, and a soundtrack, measuring approximately 347 x 1350 x 2,300 cm. It is a wooden breakwater, a kind of deck, which opens onto a floor covered with open books of different sizes, on which images of the sea can be seen. According to the artist: “a sea of dry water” (MEIRELES, 2021, p.10). There is a sound piece made from a montage of the word “water”, which is pronounced in eighty different languages.

4 (Oral information). MANUEL, Antonio. [Testimony given to one of the authors]. Rio de Janeiro (artist’s studio), 12th Sept. 2017. (audio recording - 1h25 min 1hr 25min.)

Cildo Meireles conceived his installations in three versions. In the case of *Marulho*, created in 1991 and assembled for the first time six years later, at the Johannesburg Biennial, in 1997, the trio is distributed among the artist's own collection, MAM Rio and the National Fund for Contemporary Art – a collection belonging to the French State. The work is accompanied by a project that consists of a detailed map with all instructions for assembly. Even if its parts degrade, no great effort is needed for restoration, as the project can be remade.

Cildo Meireles' installation was present on the international art circuit, but it was not the version belonging to MAM Rio that circulated. In 2013, the work was among the highlights of the exhibition *Cildo Meireles - Installations*, exhibited at the Museo Nacional Centro de Arte Reina Sofía, in Spain, and at the Serralves Museum of Contemporary Art, in Portugal. The following year, the work was presented, and gave its name to the exhibition, at the Pirelli Hangar Bicocca Foundation in Spain.

In the case of MAM Rio, since its acquisition 20 years ago the work *Marulho* has been presented on two occasions: in the exhibition *Aquisições Essenciais*, in the same year it was included into the collection, and in the exhibition *Em Polvorosa* (2016/2017), both under the curatorship of Fernando Cocchiarella.

The exhibition *Em Polvorosa* had *Marulho* as one of its highlights. It was a group exhibition consisting of works from three collections kept in the museum (MAM Rio, Gilberto Chateaubriand, and Joaquim Paiva). The curatorship favored its own collection, exhibiting works by more than 100 artists occupying the entire second floor of the museum. In an interview with *Jornal do Brasil*, Cocchiarella mentioned works by nationally and internationally renowned artists, such as Pollock, Lygia Clark, Calder, Lucio Fontana, and emphasized that he also wanted to distinguish “very well-known but little shown” artists, such as Anita Malfatti. (COCCHIARALE, 2001)

Through its policy of loaning works to other institutions, *Marulho* was also exhibited in 2006 at the Museu de Arte Contemporânea do Ceará and at the Vale do Rio Doce Museum, in Espírito Santo. The following year, it was presented at the 6th Mercosul Biennial, in Rio Grande do Sul.

Cildo Meireles is a central artist in the history of Brazilian art, with international recognition. Today in Brazil the Instituto Inhotim, in Minas Gerais, is the only institution that offers permanent access to his work. MAM Rio's logistical and financial effort to identify and fill some of the historical gaps

in its collection through the *Aquisições Essenciais* project cannot yet be understood as successful, such as in the example of *Marulho*. Over the last 20 years, the public, the *Cariocas*, and tourists who did not visit MAM Rio in 2001, or 2016 and 2017 have not had the chance to see the work.

The works by Antonio Manuel and Waltércio Caldas, in comparison, in addition to having been shown at MAM Rio, in the exhibitions *Aquisições Essenciais* and *Em Polvorosa*, had just one more exhibition. *Fantasma* was part of Antonio's solo show held at the institution, between 2013 and 2014, and *Ping-Ping*, was at the group exhibition *MAM 60 anos – Formação da coleção*, which took place between 2008 and 2009.

The international recognition of Cildo Meireles' work can be seen in the 1992 installation *Babel*, which is permanently exhibited at the Tate, in London. In 2013, the work was acquired by the British institution (with the assistance of the Latin American Acquisitions Committee and the D. Daskalopoulos Collection) after a meticulous survey by the Tate Modern research team: "They arrived at the studio with a complete dossier, they knew everything about the work, they had information that not even I had filed" (MEIRELES, 2021, p.12).

The artist says that he began to elaborate *Babel* in 1991 when he observed all the different types of radios that were sold on Canal Street, but he also reminds us that the work is linked to his memories.

As a child, I used to listen to the radio in the dark. When I walked through the streets of Rio and saw people standing there, holding books, I imagined all those books with images of water, and then I started a piece called *Marulho*, which has books on the floor and a soundtrack of voices saying 'water', all in different languages. *Eureka/Blin-dhotland* also has different sources. Of course, it has to do with the Black Hole, stars, and things like that, but also with literature. A major influence is Kafka's *The Metamorphosis*, the story of a guy, who was very regular, who always woke up a few seconds before the alarm went off and went to the bathroom. One day, he woke up, and it wasn't the usual time, it was an hour before, and he started to hear sounds, when he realized that the sounds were coming from that animal that was under his bed and he didn't know what to do with this animal thing. And in the end, he goes to work, and the *Bug* goes after him. I was also very influenced by short stories, like the one by Jorge Luis Borges that takes place in a kind of Brazil, where someone was carrying something so heavy that they almost couldn't hold it with their hands. A lot of my work comes from situations, like walking on the street, and in my case, urban inspiration is very important. *Camelô*, for example, comes from an experience on the streets of Rio de Janeiro with my father. There's also a story he used to tell me, it became *Ku Kka Ka Kka*. So, each work has a kind of short biography (MEIRELES, 2021, p.16).

The challenging issues surrounding the exhibition of the MAM Rio collection are not recent, having been identified for decades by Brazilian critics.

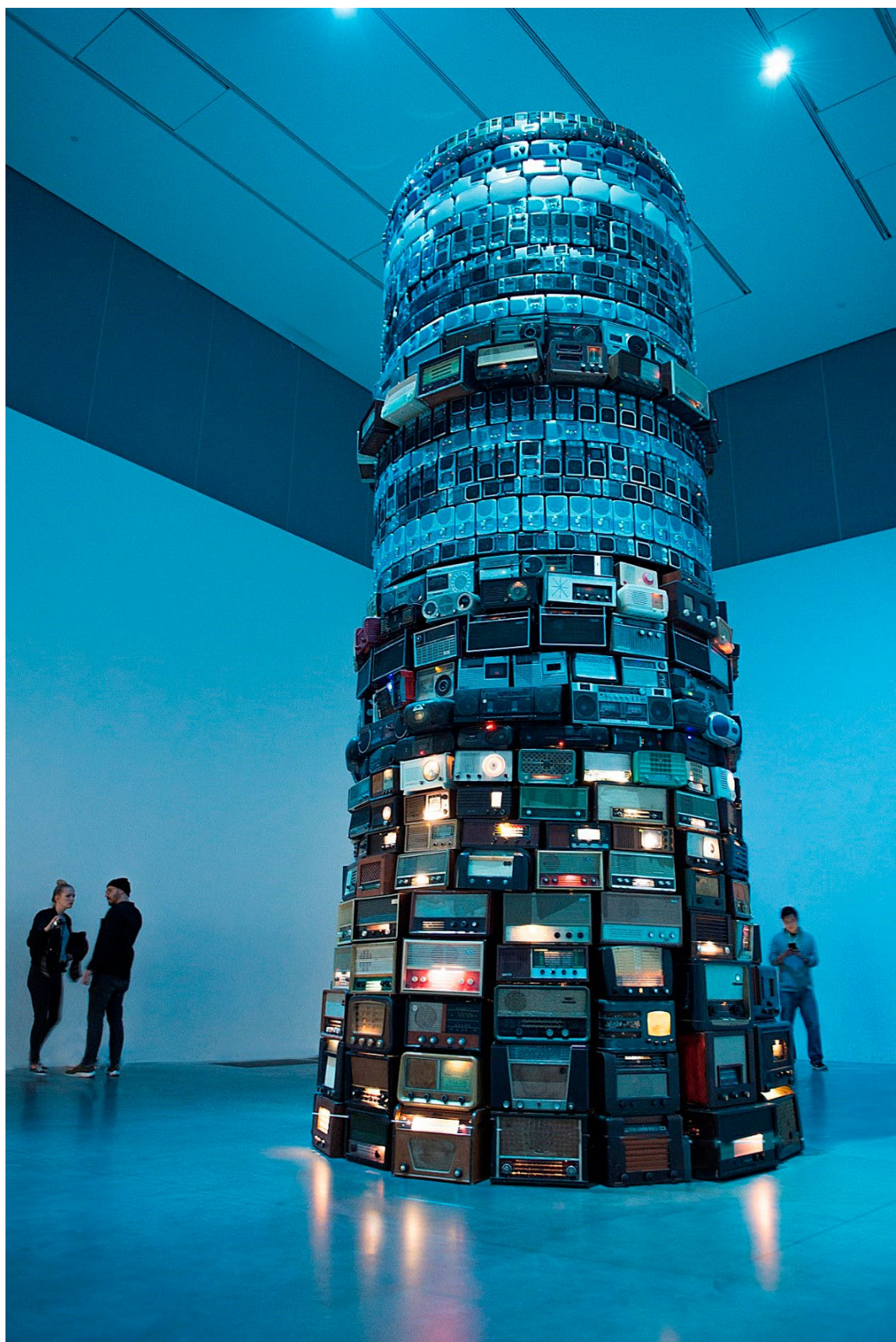


Figure 2
Cildo Meireles
Babel, 2001 – 2006
Installation - Metallic
structure and radios,
500 cm x 260 cm
Sophie Mutterer.
Collection
Tate Modern London.

In 1975, art critic Francisco Bittencourt published *O acervo do MAM* (The MAM Collection), in which he reflected on the exhibition *Arte Brasileira - Acervo MAM*, held that year. Amid financial and management problems, the critic pondered that the museum's collection was not presented. At the time, the list of 900 works included national and international artists such as Picasso, Salvador Dalí, Paul Klee, Miró, Giacometti and Henry Moore.

Only recently has the important collection started to be presented under a true regime of rotation. Most of it was stored in the basement and, according to what is said, some pieces were quite damaged, as the museum is unable to carry out its restoration. The problem, as can be seen, is most serious, and that is why the MAM board decided to adopt urgent measures to remedy the situation (...) The exhibition *Arte Brasileira - Acervo do MAM* has 96 artists whose names were selected by a mysterious Cultural Planning Commission which, according to information, seems to have already been dissolved due to lack of agreement among its members. The museum's intention is to renew its Brazilian collection, either in the sense of filling in gaps, with works by representative artists who are not yet there, or in updating it, in the case of those already documented (BITENCOURT, 2016, p. 105).

Final Considerations

In 1982, the critic Francisco Bittencourt, wrote *Dez anos de Experimentação* (Ten Years of Experimentation), revealing a retrospective analysis of the recent past, highlighting the prominent role of MAM Rio in the production of the Brazilian artistic avant-garde in the 1970s:

The MAM naturally became the center from which the most advanced moments of Brazilian art developed. In 1971, Frederico Morais tried to give the museum the ideological backbone it lacked, creating the *Unidade Experimental* with Luiz Alphonsus and Cildo Meireles. That same year, the critic launched the project *Domingos da Criação*, with great public success. The *Domingos* brought back from the previous decade the idea of art in the Aterro, of mass cultural promotion. They followed a highly creative and broad line and managed to awaken in many people the pleasure of the playful form of art (BITENCOURT, 2016, p. 487).

A few years later, in 1986, Frederico Morais published the *Depoimento de uma Geração 1969-1970*, on the occasion of the project *Ciclo de Exposições sobre Arte no Rio de Janeiro*, at Galeria Banerj, in Rio de Janeiro. The publication presented critical texts, testimonials by artists and images about the production of that turn of the decade. In an interview, the artist Thereza Simões presents her way of working, researching, and organizing around *experimentalism*.

In fact, we were not a group because we were very individualistic, but there was something in common between us, a challenging position at work. A risky work, political irreverence, a very free position in relation to art and the market (SIMÕES, 1986, not paginated).

In 2001, the nucleus known as experimentalism, which constituted a part of the *Aquisições Essenciais*, points to the experiences of the *Área Experimental* and the *Unidade Experimental* in the trajectory of MAM Rio. It would be the fulfillment of the museum's historic duty to include in its collection the production from that period of the institution and the history of Brazilian art.

Marulho is a work by one of the most important living Brazilian artists, with a life and work deeply linked to what was called *experimentalism*, but it is not a work from the period alluded to by the curatorial discourse of MAM Rio at the time of its acquisition. Aside from this question, the gesture of appeasement to the abruptly interrupted past did not continue given the low frequency of the exhibition of the work to the museum's public. This problem goes beyond a specific analysis of *Marulho*, being symptomatic of the fragile management of our country's collections, for reasons that go beyond the budget.

MAM Rio declares, in its 1986 statute, Art. 2, that among its purposes is the objective of forming collections and maintaining exhibitions. It is rare for museums in Brazil to have a collection management plan that includes institutional policies for acquisition and disposal that are defined and applied, as well as risk management, planning and transparent rules that protect their heritage, as recommended by the International Council of Museums (2009). According to information provided by MAM Rio, the institution is undergoing a restructuring process and is currently engaged in the preparation and implementation of a collection management plan.

According to the *Estatuto Brasileiro de Museus – Lei n. 11.904/2009* (Brazilian Statute of Museums – Law n. 11,904/2009), collection management is responsible for safeguarding the collections, caring for the physical well-being and content of the collection, with long-term security and public access to the collection. The museum is a non-profit institution with a social, cultural and research function, whose objective is to carry out actions to safeguard, research and communicate the material and immaterial cultural goods that make up its collection. Its collections must be organized according to the nature and specific purpose for which they are intended, and its structural and functional organization must be based on specific methods and techniques, aiming at the best way to document, conserve, investigate, communicate, interpret, promote, and exhibit.

There is no specific time for the museum to withdraw a work from the technical reserve and share it with the public. The reasons vary from insti-

tution to institution, including curatorial, technical and logistical criteria. The reasons why an institution that acquires a work of this importance has shown it only twice in 20 years remain unanswered. Considering that *Marulho's* selection to compose the experimental nucleus of the *Aquisições Essenciais* was justified by the link between the author's trajectory and experimental art, and considering the magnitude of the artist Cildo Meireles, winner of the Spanish Velázquez Prize in 2008, the situation becomes even more serious.

The absence of firm institutional policies independent of the arrival and departure of different curatorial managers and projects is as challenging as the lack of incentives for museums. The underutilization of the collection compromises the museum, the work, the artist, and the country's art history. In extreme cases, it even considered selling the most relevant pieces from the collection, as in 1975, when journalist Luis Carlos Cabral published the article *O jeito é vender o Picasso?* (The solution is to sell the Picasso?) in the newspaper *Opinião*, in Rio de Janeiro, with the headline:

The Museum of Modern Art in Rio faces another serious financial crisis. Its Board is even thinking of sacrificing the Burle Marx's gardens to expand its lucrative parking lot. Others think that the solution can come from its valuable collection (CABRAL, 1975, p. 24).

The *Cabeça cubista* (*Cubist Head*, 1909), by Pablo Picasso, survived the board and management of MAM Rio at the time, but not the fire that occurred three years later. The work *Nº 16* (1950), by Jackson Pollock, on the other hand, survived the fire, but not the current management of the museum. In 2019, the institution offered the painting for sale at the Phillips auction house. For now, Roberto Burle Marx's gardens continue to resist.

From the sample offered by the set of interviews, the collection does not appear relevant. The fire was more problematic in a symbolic way for the group interviewed, due to the interruption of the museum's program and less because of the material loss, even with it being made up of a select group of specialists in the field of art.

The project for the production and publication of the *Dossiê MAM* started two years after the fire happened. It was one of the two pieces of research undertaken by the *Projeto ABC*, according to Paulo Sérgio Duarte (2010), coordinator of this sector at Funarte. The other generated the book *Abstracionismo Geométrico e Informal*, edited by Anna Bella Geiger and Fernando Cocchiarale. First published in 1987, it became a reference work for studies on the theme of abstraction in Brazil.

The example of the fate of this other research project, considering that we have still made little progress on the study of institutions in our history of art, among all the problematic issues raised, is perhaps one of the most regrettable, due to the contribution it could have made to the training of professionals in our field.

The interpretation of the occupation of a historical gap through the acquisition of the *Núcleo Experimental*, especially the work *Marulho* discussed here, despite the irregularity of its exhibition, and the production and presentation of research about it, can still be qualified, both for the specialized as for the non-specialized public.

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