From Mail Art to Telepresence: Communication at a Distance in the Works of Paulo Bruscky and Eduardo Kac

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Abstract

This article examines the early works of Brazilian artists Paulo Bruscky and Eduardo Kac, as important precursors to art and activism on the Internet. It argues that their legacies of the 1970s and 1980s are significant in any node of the global cultural network. Both engaged art and communication at a distance: Bruscky in Recife in the 1970s, through Mail Art, and Kac in Rio de Janeiro in the 1980s, through videotext networks and telepresence events. Moreover, their conceptual practices resisted the political oppression of those decades by nurturing "the experimental exercise of freedom."

Keywords

Mail Art; Network Art; telecommunication; Paulo Bruscky; Eduardo Kac.

Da Arte Correio à Telemática: Comunicação à Distancia nos trabalhos de Paulo Bruscky e Eduardo Kac

Resumo

Esse artigo examina os primeiros trabalhos dos artistas brasileiros Paulo Bruscky e Eduardo Kac, importantes precursores da arte e do ativismo na Internet. Também argumenta que esse legado artístico dos anos 70 e 80s é significante em qualquer nódulo da rede cultural global. Ambos exploraram a arte e a comunicação à distância: Bruscky em Recife nos anos setenta, através da Arte Postal, e Kac no Rio de Janeiro nos anos oitenta, através da rede de Videotextos e da Telepresença. Além disso, as práticas conceituais desses artistas resistiram à opressão política dessas duas décadas enquanto nutriam "o exercício experimental da liberdade."

Palavras-Chave

Arte Correio; Arte em rede; telecomunicação; Paulo Bruscky; Eduardo Kac.

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Networks have no centers, only nodes. Much of the experimental art of the 1970s and 1980s developed in points of intersection and cultural hubs distributed around the world. This article examines one of those hubs, located in Brazil, through the early works of artists Paulo Bruscky and Eduardo Kac. Performing outside traditional art institutions and practices, Bruscky and Kac used systems of circulation and electronic networks to activate public spaces. Their works forged complex relations between place and space, and transformed art and life through cultural activism. During this period, both artists approached art without regard for national borders or the categorical boundaries of traditional media. With a shared consciousness of art as an ideological system constituted and validated in large part by official institutions—the studio, art market, museum, gallery, art criticism, and art history—Bruscky and Kac eschewed traditional venues and objects, opting instead, from the beginning of their careers, to invent new ones.

This article also discusses the artists' early works in relation to the political climate in which they operated. Born a generation apart—Bruscky in 1949, and Kac in 1962—their works from the 1970s and 1980s, respectively, marked the beginnings of their careers and contributed to the aesthetics of remote action and interaction. Although both artists were born in Brazil, Bruscky has always been based in that country. Kac, however, spent only the first nine years of his career in Brazil (1980-1988). Based in Chicago since 1989, Kac has emerged in the subsequent fifteen years having the Internet and the international art scene as his natural environment. From 1968 to the late 1980s, Brazil was marked by a deprivation of public freedoms imposed by the military dictatorship, first installed with a coup in 1964. Bruscky and Kac have engaged with art at significant turning points in the Brazilian political-cultural context. Bruscky's work responded to the political repression of the early 1970s; Kac's opened new spaces during the tentative beginnings of political tolerance in the early 1980s.

Bruscky's work is undergoing its first wave of national recognition (Freire, 1999 and

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Basbaum, 2001).[1] Kac's work, first acknowledged internationally, along with a vibrant and influential reputation, enjoys growing recognition in Brazil.[2] Kac was part of the much-celebrated "Geração 80" (the 1980s generation) in Brazil.[3] Contrary to his painter-colleagues, whose work enjoyed early critical acclaim as well as national and international market success, Kac's production from the same period took much longer to even be accepted as art. Only in the recent and increasingly pluralistic art scene, have the accomplishment of both artists begun to receive deserved recognition. The reductive critical view espoused by most Brazilian art critics and art historians that cast the 1980s in terms of neo-expressionist painting needs revision. Bruscky's and Kac's early works are among the most complex and critical legacies of the 1970s and 1980s, in any node of the global cultural network.

Paulo Bruscky's Aesthetics of Circulation and Reproduction

One of Brazil's darkest periods of state political oppression began in 1968 and extended throughout the 1970s. During those years, making art, and especially experimental art was a difficult and dangerous proposition.[4] Nevertheless, artists continued to resist authoritarian structures by pushing the boundaries of experimentation and the limits of public freedom. They often chose to circulate their works outside official artistic institutions, perceived by many as being in agreement with the oppressive governmental regime. Many artists, such as Hélio Oiticica and Lygia Clark, chose to spend most of the seventies in exile, continuing to emphasize

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[1] Paulo Bruscky's work has recently been showcased in various Brazilian exhibitions, round table discussions, and articles, such as Ricardo Basbaum's "O Artista Como Curador" in *Panaroma da Arte Brasileira 2001* (São Paulo: Museu de Arte Moderna de São Paulo, 2001; and Cristina Freire, *Poéticas de Processo* (São Paulo: Iluminuras, 1999) and *Paulo Bruscky: Arte, Arquivo e Utopia* (Recife: Companhia Editora de Pernambuco – CEPE, 2007). A large retrospective exhibit of his work was held at the Observatório Cultural Malakoff, Recife, 2001. Bruscky's videos were screened in 2002 in Recife (Fundação Joaquim Nabuco), Curitiba (Cinemateca de Curitiba), and Rio de Janeiro (Agora). The information about Bruscky's work contained here is based on an interview with the author on 27 May 2002, at Bruscky's Torreão studio, Recife, Brazil.

[2] Eduardo Kac continues to develop a thriving international career that, entering its third decade, has received attention from the international popular media for his transgenic *GFP Bunny,* inviting controversy and generating discussion in multiple arenas. Some of his less known early works are being examined here for the first time. For a comprehensive bibliography and documentation on his career see <http://www.ekac.org>.

[3] This group of artists was showcased in an exhibition titled *2080* (twenty artists of the '80s generation) at the Museu de Arte Moderna de São Paulo, Jan. 24-April 5, 2003. Kac contributed to the show with *Cro-Magnon*, a billboard originally shown in Rio de Janeiro in 1984.

[4] The year 1968 marks the beginning of an era of state terrorism in Brazil. On 13 December the military government issued the AI-5 [Fifth Institutional Act] signed by military President General Costa e Silva. The AI-5 closed Congress and suspended all political and constitutional rights, opening the way to political persecution, torture, and censorship. Following the interruption by a military coup in 1964, presidential elections were not held again until 1989.

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the participatory, sensorial explorations they had embraced in the 1960s.[5] In 1970 in Rio de Janeiro, Cildo Meireles printed the message *Yankees Go Home* on Coca-Cola bottles—the symbol of American imperialism—and stamped the question *Quem Matou Herzog?* [Who Killed Herzog?][6] on Cruzeiro notes, returning both bottles and currency into circulation. These works were part of Meireles' series *Inserções em Circuitos Ideológicos* [Insertion into Ideological Circuits] employing systems of currency and commodity circulation and distribution to carry subversive political messages. In these works, the scale of the intervention was not the point (the message on a Coke bottle can be seen as being like a message in a bottle thrown into the sea) but the performance of an act designed to "give voice to the void," as the art writer and curator Paulo Herkenfoff has pointed out (Herkenhoff, 1995: 69-73).

In Recife, on Brazil's Northeast coast, Bruscky found in the Mail Art movement an alternative venue for art making, participating in shared networks of ideas and gestures of resistance that linked national and international artists. The Mail Art movement bypassed the market of artistic commodities, as well as the salons and biennials that treated art exhibitions like beauty pageants. Bruscky's work engaged with Fluxus' concepts of fusion of art and life. His interest in processes of circulation, reproduction, and distribution yielded performances and interventions that may not always have looked like "art," or even been counted as "art," but that without a doubt generated a new thinking that traditional art practices could not articulate.

Mail Art: To and From Recife

Over the last three decades, Bruscky's work has taken many forms, and employed various materials, sites, and aesthetic strategies. For him, the great network started with Mail Art in the 1960s. Despite the earlier pioneer examples—from Mallarmé's poem-addresses on envelopes to Marcel Duchamp's postcards—only in 1960, with Fluxus artists, and in 1962 with Ray Johnson, according to Bruscky, did the

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[5] For Hélio Oiticica's 1970s production see Carlos Basualdo (ed.), *Quasi-Cinemas* (Ohio: Wexner Center for the Arts, 2001). For Lygia Clark's work and writings see Manuel J. Borja-Villel, Nuria Enguita Mayo, and Luciano Figueiredo, (eds.), *Lygia Clark* (Barcelona: Fundació Antoni Tàpies, 1998).
[6] Vladimir Herzog was a São Paulo investigative journalist who was arrested by the security forces and later found hanging in his cell. The government stated: "it was a suicide," a claim nobody accepted. Most people believed he was tortured to death by the Brazilian police and government.

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international Mail Art movement begin to fully employ the mail system as medium. Mail Art continued to develop throughout the 1970s connecting Latin American artists not only with one another but with artists from the Gutai group in Japan and Fluxus artists in the United States and Europe. Bruscky's correspondents among artists included besides Johnson, Ken Friedman (with whom he performed in NY), and Dick Higgins.

Bruscky initially became involved with the Mail Art movement in 1973 not only as a participant but also as a promoter, organizing international Mail Art exhibits in Recife in 1975 and 1976. Bruscky's archive contains about 15,000 documents and is today an important source of documentation of the Mail Art movement. The *First International Mail Art Exhibit* in Brazil—organized by Bruscky and Ypiranga Filho in 1975 in Recife's central post office—was closed by censors minutes after its opening (many Latin American participants included messages denouncing state violence and censorship). Brazil's *Second International Mail Art Exhibit* in 1976— organized by Bruscky and Daniel Santiago, and again sponsored by the central post office, showcased 3,000 works from twenty-one countries. This exhibition was also closed by the police immediately after opening. It was seen only by a few dozen people. Bruscky and Santiago were dragged off to prison by the Federal Police and detained *incommunicado* for ten days. The majority of the works in the show were returned to the artists by the Police after thirty days; many were damaged, while others were confiscated indefinitely as evidence.

Bruscky was jailed three times, in 1968, 1973, and 1976. After 1976 he received death threats for a period of six months and was constantly followed by the police until he denounced this situation as the theme of a solo show in a Recife art gallery, making public the threats on his life. He was never associated with a political party and his militancy was first and foremost cultural and artistic, embracing art, as "the experimental exercise of freedom."[7]

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[7] The forward-looking Brazilian art critic Mario Pedrosa used the expression in the 1960s to describe the experimental works of Hélio Oiticica, Lygia Clark, Lygia Pape, Antonio Manuel, and others. Rina Carvajal and Alma Ruiz (eds.), *The Experimental Exercise of Freedom* (Los Angeles: MOCA, 1999).

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Communication at a distance, public participation and circulation—concepts central to the Mail Art movement—playfully deployed the rules and regulations of the international mail system, as Bruscky did in his series *Sem Destino* (Without Destination and/or Destiny) 1975-1982; his messages, such as *Hoje a Arte é esse Comunicado* (today art is this message), stamped on envelopes and postcards, and also included in telegrams and telex; in addition to his creation of chain letters that produced multiple editions and often boomeranged back to the sender. Though supported by a few art institutions, Mail Art was resisted by others, which had no interest in conceptual or experimental art. An example of the latter was the rejection by the jury of Bruscky's 1973 proposal, which he sent in the form of a telex to the *30th Salão Paranaense*, a juried show in the South of Brazil. The missive proposed the following three installations as his entry: the first, a formless pile of all the packing materials from the other artworks arranged in a corner of the exhibition space; the second, all the materials used by the museum cleaning staff (brooms, buckets, water, rags) hanging one meter above the floor; the third, a display over a chair of all the materials used in the installation of artworks (screws, nails, hammers, etc) along with the title "Don't touch! These objects are being exhibited."

Through Mail Art Bruscky promoted public "happenings" along with encounters among strangers brought about by the correspondence network. An example was the happening Bruscky created in 1977 for the *Ricerche Inter/Media Centro Autogestito di Attivita Espressive*, in Ferrara, Italy. Titled *Re-Composição Postal* [Postal Re-Composition] it promoted an encounter among twenty-seven of Ferrara's citizens who received by mail a section of a work divided by Bruscky into twenty-seven parts to be reassembled by the recipients.

Mental Space, Aural Space, Aero Space: The Sky is the Limit
While involved with Mail Art, Bruscky simultaneously explored various performance, cinematic, aural, and electronic aesthetics. The multimedia he examined in the 1970s included reproductive technologies (electrography, blue printing, and fax), along with experimental film and video. In 1970, while working as a hospital administrator, Bruscky developed sound poems based on patients' utterances,

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moans, and screams, and created a series of "drawings" using electrocardiogram, electroencephalogram, and X-Ray machines. These graphic images were later incorporated in Mail Art envelopes and in various performances including those with fax machines. Bruscky also created sound poems and compiled sound works by other artists, including John Cage, broadcasting them on a mainstream Recife radio station during the winter art festivals of 1978 and 1979.

Emphasizing connections among art, science, and technology, the artist quotes Santos Dumont, the Brazilian inventor and father of aviation, observing that "whatever one man imagines, others can achieve." For Bruscky, it is important to place art in the realm of visionary scientific and technological inventions. This wider cultural horizon for artistic creation allowed him the freedom to pursue large scale, open-ended projects, such as his 1974 proposition for the creation of artificial aurora borealis (to be produced by airplanes coloring cloud formations). Bruscky placed adds in newspapers to both document and circulate the project while looking for sponsors. These appeared in the *Diário de Pernambuco*, in Recife, September 22, 1974; in the *Jornal do Brasil*, Rio de Janeiro, December 29, 1976; and in the *Village Voice*, New York, May 25, 1982. The creation of artificial auroras was finally realized in 1992, not by Bruscky, but by the U.S. National Aeronautics and Space Administration—NASA, as part of environmental research. Approximately sixty artificial mini-auroras were created by employing electron guns to fire rays at the atmosphere from the space shuttle *Atlantis* (Harwood, 1992).

From CopyArt to Teleart: Duplication and Transmition, "Today Art is This Message"

Bruscky's exploration of reproductive technologies in the 1970s and early 1980s, from the use of stamps in Mail Art to photocopiers and fax machines, was rooted in his training as a photographer and his engagement with visual poetry. His performances with photocopiers shared with artists of the 1960s and 1970s an anti-representational attitude towards art making, a desire to short circuit the relations between original and copy, as well as the work's inside/outside boundaries [Figure 1]. In this process of unhinging modes of production, representation, and circulation,

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he underscored how the context where art operates frames and produces meaning. His criticism of originality in Xerox Art (the name photocopy art received in Brazil), ironically also explored the specificity of the medium, as Bruscky employed reductive and additive processes with a playful and poetic sensibility that expanded the limits and functions of the photocopier. He adjusted and altered the various parts of the machine to orchestrate series of images produced with cinematic sensibility. He expanded the machine's narrow depth-of-field by using mirrors and slide projections below and above the photocopier's flat bed. From his prolific cycle of photocopy art, Bruscky made three Xeroxfilms, eventually part of his total experimental production of about thirty short films and videos. His Xeroxfilms were made with stop motion from thousands of Xerox copies produced in performances. For his second Xeroxfilm, for instance, Bruscky set fire to a photocopier which documented its own destruction in 25 seconds. For this body of work with the photocopiers Bruscky received a Guggenheim Fellowship in 1980 and spent the ensuing year working in New York and various cities in Europe.

Figure 1. Paulo Bruscky in the act of his *Xeroxperformance* at the Universidade Católica de Pernambuco-Recife, 1980. This performance generated 1,350 photocopies that were filmed in stop motion, creating an experimental film animation under the same title; photo courtesy Paulo Bruscky.

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Fax Art was another means of mediating distances, conflating the experience of Mail Art with that of Xerox Art while enabling new performances from afar. The first artistic fax transmission in Brazil was executed between Bruscky in Recife and Roberto Sandoval in São Paulo on October 31, 1980. The documentation of this first transmission was exhibited in *Arte Novos Meios/Multimeios* [New Media/Multimedia Art] at the Fundação Armando Alvares Penteado—FAAP, São Paulo, 1985.[8] In other fax performances Bruscky incorporated the 1970 electrocardiogram "drawings" of his brain waves, and the graphic recorded heartbeats of his electrocardiograms in "direct transmissions of thought" he referred to as *Cons-ciência da Arte*, a title that does not translate readily into English and refers to both art's consciousness and to science. For Bruscky, the machines registered his "direct drawing process" documenting in graphic form, his thoughts and feelings, brain and heart activity.

Bruscky has maintained an active presence in Recife's cultural scene for more than three decades, and continues to work as an artist, curator, and archivist. In works from the 1970s, he approached art with a new agency that is becoming increasingly important to a younger generation of artists. Whether working with the mail system or planning sky art interventions in which airplanes paint the clouds, his performances erupted into public spaces without the sanction of traditional institutions or curatorial authorities, therefore continuously expanding the boundaries of art beyond its traditional frame and producing alternative sites for artistic creation and circulation. Bruscky worked both within and without art institutions, acting directly on the urban environment and often employing the mass media—such as newspapers, billboards, and radio stations—as venues, artistic media, and forms of documentation. His experimental practices reaffirm art's critical and activist edge while becoming a lesson for critical theorists, and independent curators in their rethinking of the boundaries between art making, critical writing, and curatorial practices. In his engagement from Mail Art to Fax Art, Bruscky's work ignored physical distances, performing experimental actions that continuously locate art in the utopian space beyond the medium and beyond national, and geographical

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8 Curated by Daisy Pecinini, this exhibit was one of the few that in the 1980s focused on emergent art engaged with technology. Among other artists, Bruscky participated with his three *Xeroxfilms*, besides his *Fax Art* documentation from 1980s and a new fax transmission for that show. Eduardo Kac exhibited three of his holopoems, *Holo/Olho*, from 1983, and *OCO* and *Zyx* from 1985.

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boundaries.

Eduardo Kac's Porno-Poetry Performances

In 1979, Brazil's military government, under the pressure of public opinion, gave amnesty to all those involved in "political crimes." Political exiles began to return home. As the tight censorship of the 1970s began to erode, so did the polarization between left and right characterized during the period by Che Guevara as the symbol of Latin American liberation versus Coca-Cola, equated with North American imperialism. According to Zuenir Ventura, during the ten years following the declaration of the AI-5 (Fifth Institutional Act signed in 1968) which closed Congress and suspended all political and constitutional rights, approximately 500 films, 450 plays, 200 books, dozens of radio programs and more than 500 song lyrics, along with a dozen soap opera episodes, were censored (Ventura, 1988: 285).

The country's slow return to democracy in the 1980s was accompanied by a shift in the focus of critical theory, from an essentialist Marxism centered on class antagonism and commodity production to a fresh interest in the formation of the subject suggested by semiotics, psychoanalytical theory, and Foucauldian notions of power. This shift accompanied a new understanding of democracy as a task, rather than a gift to be given or taken (Butler, 2000). This self-critical examination of authoritarian and chauvinistic streaks among the intellectual, political, and urban middle class, was marked by two best-selling books written by a journalist returning from a long exile in Sweden: Fernando Gabeira. His first book, *O Que É Isso Companheiro* [What Is This Comrad?], is the autobiographical story of a young intellectual, who joined the urban guerrillas in Rio de Janeiro, planning and executing the kidnapping of the American ambassador who was then exchanged for 15 political prisoners (Gabeira, 1979).[9] Gabeira's second book, *O Crepúsculo do Macho* [The Sunset of the Macho] exposed the inherent machismo and homophobia in the leftist movement and in Brazilian society (Gabeira, 1980).

At that time, as a young university student in Rio de Janeiro, Eduardo Kac studied

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[9] Fernando Gabeira's book *O Que E' Isso Companheiro* (1979), became a film directed by Bruno Barreto in 1997. Titled in English*, Four Days in September*, it received an Oscar nomination.

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foreign languages, philosophy, and semiotics while working as an artist and writer. The "Poesia Pornô" [Porn Poetry] movement he founded in 1980 helped shape this political context by reclaiming the public space. Kac explained the movement:

> The performances from 1980 to 82 had elements of scatology, surprise, humor, subversion, gags, and the mundane. In these poetic performances, the so-called vulgar or bad words become noble and positive. Scatological discourse and political discourse were one and the same and were manifested through cheerful orgiastic liberation.[10]

Kac's group performed in public spaces, such as the beach in Ipanema and the *Cinelândia* central square, the heart of Rio's downtown bohemian life, where the group performed on Friday evenings for two years (1980-82). With an emphasis on public participation, the porno-poets staged semantic displacements beginning with the word pornography. They transformed misogynist and homophobic labels into sexually liberating expressions in a process analogous to that undergone years later in the United States by the word *nigger* as flaunted by Rap culture, or the word *dyke*, as reclaimed by lesbians. Through humor, the group activated verbal transgressions that were first and foremost playful, as well as sexual, and ultimately political, in a polysemic celebration of life. They operated in the transgressive spirit of the poet Oswald de Andrade who in the 1920s proposed "the permanent transformation of taboo into totem" (Andrade, 1989: 310).

Kac called attention to the centrality of the body as a site for cultural inscription and transformation: "In my work in the early 1980s the body was everything. The body was the tool I used to question conventions, dogmas and taboos—patriarchy, religion, heterosexuality, politics, and puritanism. The body became my writing medium ultimately" (Osthoff, 1996: 21). In the artist's next phase of development, the role of the body and its relationship to language would take an unprecedented turn.

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[10] Eduardo Kac in a unpublished interview by the author on July 8, 1994, Chicago. Kac's Porn Art movement was the recent focus of a comprehensive article by Zanna Gilbert, "Transgressive Bodies," *Art in America* (November 2015): 118-125.

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Holopoetry: Meaning in Flux and the Viewer in Movement

While Kac's porno-poetry performances questioned political and cultural hegemonies, their language had straight ties to the political process of the early 1980s as well as to a long literary tradition. Kac's interest in experimental poetry along with his desire to create a new poetic language, led him to search for a new medium. He found it in holography, a medium that had never been explored for poetic expression. Kac was interested in holography's time-base potential, which enabled exploration of the inherent instability and flux he perceived in language: "In many of my holograms, time flows back and forth, in non-linear ways. The holographic medium allows me to work with language floating in space and time, breaking down, melting and dissolving, and recombining itself to produce new meanings" (Osthoff, 1996: 20). Suspending words in this immaterial space, Kac's holographic poems offered a new field for poetic exploration in an international language. His engagement with holography marked a rupture with the porno-poetry movement and began his exploration of emerging technologies as artistic and epistemological practices with the potential of global reach. He coined the term *holopoetry* to describe the body of work he developed in this medium from 1983 to 1993 (Kac, 1996: 184-212). As he pushed the tradition of visual poetry beyond the page, and beyond three-dimensional physical space, Kac explored holography as a four-dimensional medium, performing reading and writing as a time-based open-ended process.

Containing words and letters in flux, Kac's holopoems have their meanings created by the viewers' movement and point-of-view, underscoring the direct relation between knowledge and positionality. As viewers read these images differently, depending on their relative position and movement in relation to the picture plane, these works suggest that location is an important category in signifying practices—in determining what we know, how, and why. Kac's holopoems gave form to the dynamics he saw in language and communication processes. For him, meaning is always a process of negotiation that happens through dialogue and shared communication: "Nothing exists until you claim it, until you create your own narrative,

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until you construct it" (Osthoff, 1996: 23). This belief drives his emphasis on the interactive and dialogical practices that underlie his telecommunications and telepresence events, which take these explorations into the global network.[11]

Text in the Network and the Network as Medium: Telecommunications and Telepresence Before the Web

Created and experienced digitally between 1985 and 1986, Kac's first works on the electronic network were videotexts.[12] He has stated that the early 1980s marked the culmination of the process of dematerialization of the art object and the beginning of the creation of immaterial (digital) art (Kac, 1986). For him, two landmark events created the cultural conditions for this shift: the popularization of the personal computer and the rise of the global electronic network. Kac's early digital and telecommunication works emphasized process over product giving form to communication exchanges that involved reciprocity, and multidirectionality. Like his holopoems, Kac's videotexts continued to produce playful interrelations between the activities of writing and reading addressing a range of different subjects.

Tesão, [Turn-on] 1985/86 is a videotext animated-poem shown on line and on site as part of the group exhibition *Brasil High Tech* realized in 1986 at the Galeria de Arte do Centro Empresarial Rio, in Rio de Janeiro, and organized by Kac and Flavio Ferraz [Figures 2A and 2B]. *Tesão* was a declaration of love to Ruth, who Kac later married. The three-word sentence that forms this videotext, spoke of love in terms of desire. The colorful letters formed slowly on the monitor in a continuous line diagram. After all the letters of the first word had completed their graphic choreography, the screen became blank and new letters started to form the second

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[11] Kac's emphasis on the idea of dialogue is based in part on the philosopher Martin Buber's (1878–1965) notion of relations of reciprocity and intersubjetivity between I-Thou, and relations of objectification between I-it; as well as in the Russian literary critic Mikhail Bakhtin's (1895-1975) discussion of the dialogical function of literature and language.

[12] Kac's web site <http://www.ekac.org> defines videotext as follows: The videotext system allows users to log on with a remote terminal and access sequences of pages through regular phone lines. This videotext network was a precursor to today's Internet and functioned very much like it, with sites containing information about countless subjects. It also allowed users to send messages to one another (email). Different countries, such as UK, France, Japan, Canada, USA and Brazil, implemented different versions of the videotext concept under their own names. The UK called it Prestel. The Brazilian system was dubbed Videotexto. In Canada it was known as Telidon. In the USA the network was named Videotex. Under the name "Minitel," France implemented a comprehensive videotext network that was widely used throughout the 1980s. In 1984 Minitel terminals were distributed to subscribers free of charge, which helped to further popularize the network. From 1983 to 1994 (the period of the Internet boom), use of the Minitel grew continuously. In 1995 there were 7 million Minitel terminals in France. Although most countries no longer use videotext, the medium is still employed in France. It is also possible to access the Minitel through the web.

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word in a similar symmetric and cinematic rhythm. A third word was made of solid and colorful letters that overlapped and filled the screen. The letters displayed on the screen in symmetric designs did not convey meaning as graphic forms in space, but as animations in time. As letters and words were formed in slow motion, viewers interpreted the fleeting configurations as changing meaning.
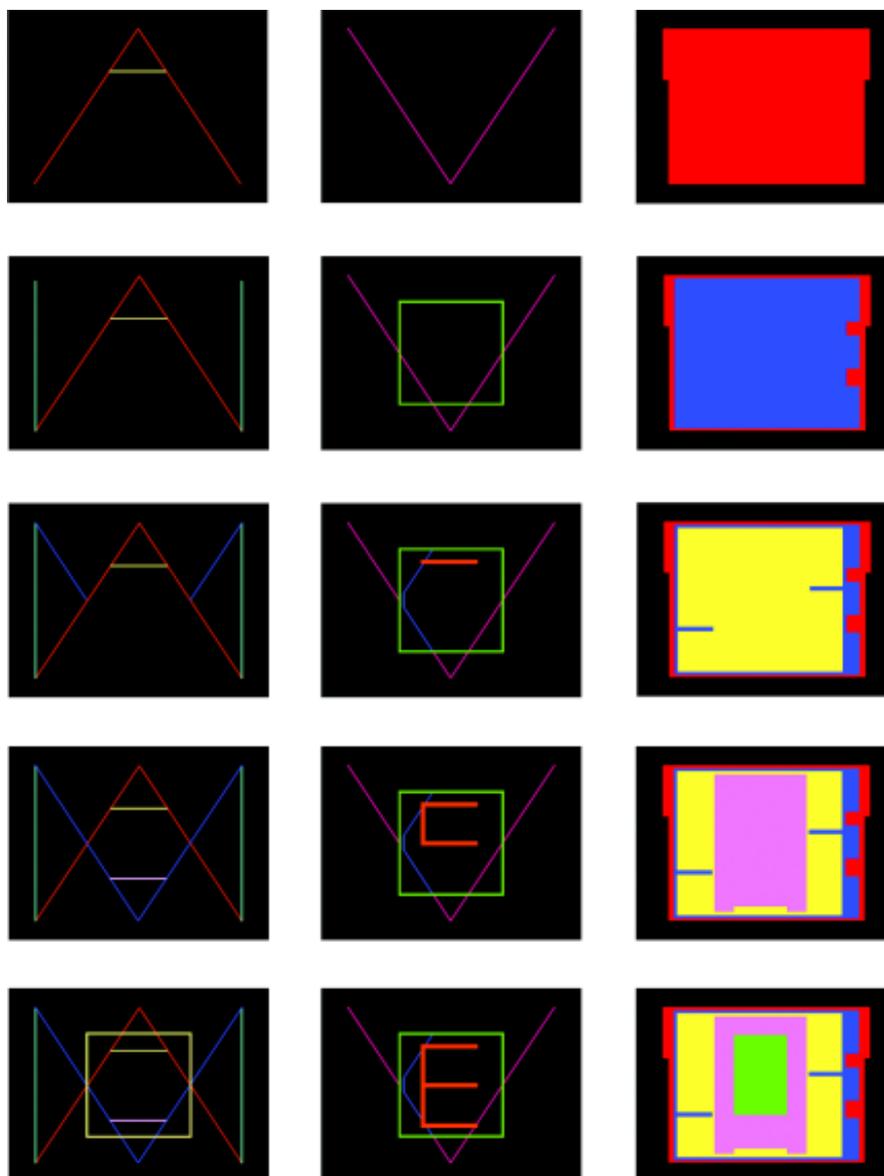

Figure 2A. Eduardo Kac, *Tesão*, [Turn-on] 1985/1986. Videotext (Minitel) digital animation shown online in the group exhibition Brasil HighTech in 1986, a national videotext art gallery organized in Rio de Janeiro by Eduardo Kac and Flavio Ferraz and presented by the Companhia Telefônica de São Paulo. Each column illustrates a sequence running from top to bottom; photos courtesy of Eduardo Kac.

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Figure 2B. Eduardo Kac, Minitel with the videotext poem *Tesão* [Turn on], 1985-86; photos courtesy of Eduardo Kac.

D/eu/s, from 1986, was a videotext animated-poem also part of the *Brasil High Tech* exhibition. It was a black and white bar code with numbers and letters on the bottom that appeared in a small area centered on the screen (the proportion of the image to the screen was that of a bar code to a product). When viewers logged on they first saw a black screen, followed by a small, white, centered rectangle. Slowly, vertical bars descended inside the horizontal rectangle. At the bottom, viewers saw apparently random letters and numbers, reminding one of conventional bar codes. Upon close scrutiny the viewer noticed that the letters formed the word "Deus" [God]. The spacing of the letters revealed "eu" [I] inside "Deus". The numbers also were not random, but indicated the date when the work was produced and uploaded to the Brazilian videotext network. The date also offered a second reading—64/86 brackets the years between the military coup in 1964 and the height of public demand for the return of democratic elections in the "Diretas Já" (Democratic Elections Now) movement, which also coincided with the forward-looking exhibition

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Brasil High Tech. The multiple meanings this short poem created—between humans and God, between God and the commodity labeling/identity to be read by scanners, and between the public demand for democracy and the utopian promises of the global network (still national at the time)—would be reexamined by Kac years later in his 1997 biotelematic performance *Time Capsule*, and in his transgenic work *Genesis* from 1999 (Dobrila, 2000)*.

Alongside videotexts, Kac's early works with telecommunications, networks, and telepresence that preceded the Web, further emphasized dialogical processes occurring in real time. He employed slow scan TV (a kind of video phone), fax-TV hybrids, and fax performances in process-based works, in which the process itself brought certain kinds of meanings to the work, such as a cinematic sense of progression, sequencing and transformations that included interruptions, delays, and the artist's interferences while images were still being received. These works from the mid to the late 1980s include *Conversation* (slow scan TV), 1987; and *Retrato Suposto—Rosto Roto* [Presumed Portrait—Foul Face] (fax-TV hybrid), 1988.[13]

Conversation was a slow-scan TV event realized at the Centro Cultural Três Rios, in São Paulo on November 17, 1987. The slow-scan TV allowed the transmission and reception of sequential still video images over regular phone lines. The series of images that comprised the piece each took from eight to twelve seconds to form. Instead of considering each picture as a cinematic representation, Kac explored the live process of image formation. This was also the principle of *Retrato Suposto—Rosto Roto* [Presumed Portrait—Foul Face], 1988, created in collaboration with Mario Ramiro, who at one end of this fax conversation operated a fax machine from a live TV program in São Paulo, while Kac at the other end, carried out this visual fax dialogue from his studio, thus connecting private and public realms [Figure 3]. According to Kac, "the basis of this link was a real time operation utilizing the fax as a dialogic medium, in the context of a television broadcast, a unidirectional system of mass communication. The goal was not to create pictures remotely but to explore

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13 Other related works not examined here are: *Three City Link* (slow scan TV), 1989; *Impromptu* (fax and slow scan TV), 1990; *Interfaces* (slow scan TV), 1990; *Elastic Fax 1* (fax), 1991; and *Elastic Fax II* (fax), 1994; *Dialogical Drawing* (telecommunication sculpture) 1994.

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the interactive, improvisational quality of both personal and public telecommunications media simultaneously, integrating the apparently antagonist media into a single process" (Kac, 1988).
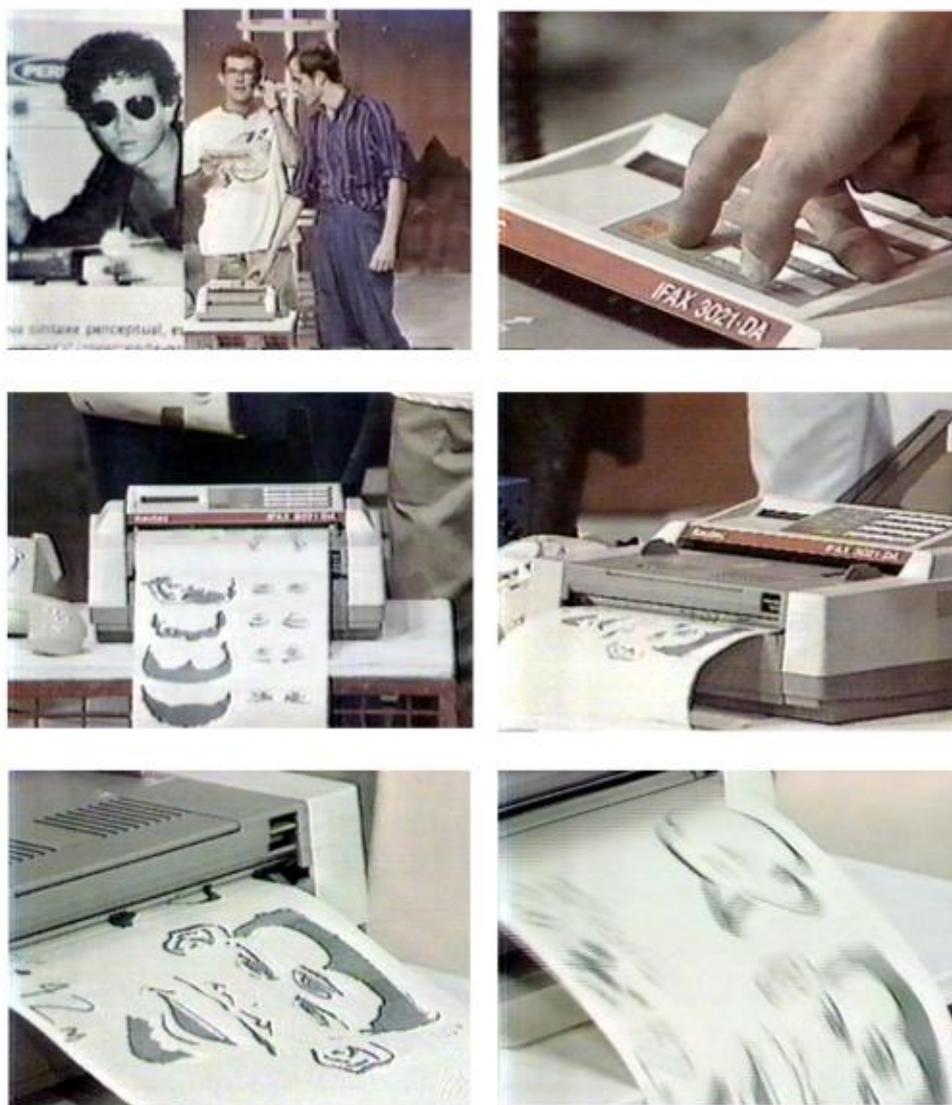
Figure 3. Eduardo Kac and Mario Ramiro, *Retrato Suposto—Rosto Roto* [Presumed Portrait–Foul Face], 1988. Telecommunications event between Rio de Janeiro and São Paulo merging fax and live TV. Connecting the public medium of television with the private medium of the fax, this work created a system of feedback based on the continuous exchange and transformation of images. The images in the figure were extracted from the live broadcast realized in 1988; photos courtesy of Eduardo Kac.

In 1984, Kac started to create telepresence or remote presence events. These telepresence works created dislocations between place and space, that is, between the work's *literal* site, such as a gallery installation, the work's *symbolic* or *rhetorical*

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dimension, such as the topos of Eden, and the work's real-time presence in the virtual space of the electronic network. These experiences of dislocation between real and virtual spaces are more common than we think, Kac observed: "We have developed concepts about cultures that we have never seen, never experienced. In my telepresence installations, I'm making geographic displacements that reflect that" (Osthoff, 1996: 23). This complex new geography in which telepresence art operates emphasizes real time over real space, enabling a remote perception of the world from the point of view of the other, of the object—through the scale/lenses/eyes of the telerobot, "in a non-metaphysical out-of-body experience, if you will" (Osthoff, 1996: 22).

Kac's first telepresence project dates from 1984 and was never realized, as a result of countless technical obstacles. Titled *Cyborg* the project involved three different Rio de Janeiro galleries—Galeria Cândido Mendes, Funarte, and Escola de Artes Visuais do Parque Lage—and the remote control of sculptural-robotic objects. In 1986, Kac realized his first telepresence work the *RC Robot*. He worked with radio-controlled telerobotics in the context of the exhibition *Brasil High Tech*. The artist used a seven-foot tall anthropomorphic robot as a host who conversed with exhibition visitors in real time [Figure 4]. The robot's voice was that of a human being transmitted via radio. Exhibition visitors did not see the telerobot operator, who was telepresent in the robot's body. Still in the context of the exhibition, the robot was used in a dialogical performance realized with Otavio Donasci, in which the robot interacted with Donasci's videocreature (a performer with a TV monitor for a head). Through the robotic body, a human (hidden away) improvised responses to the videocreature's pre-recorded utterances.

Between 1987 and 1988, still in Rio de Janeiro, Kac drew sketches for two small telerobots to be controlled by participants in two distant cities. The idea was to enable a participant in city A to control a telerobot in city B and vice-versa. The ideas explored in these sketches would lay the groundwork for the *Ornitorrinco Project*, Kac's name for the small telerobot he would create with Ed Bennett in Chicago in 1989 (*Ornitorrinco* in Portuguese means platypus, which as an egg-laying mammal

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is a hybrid animal). The *Ornitorrinco Project* became increasingly more complex in the 1990s, as Kac employed telecommunications to mediate relations among people, animals, plants, and robots. In his telepresence events process is produced by all the forces, types of use, programs, glitches, and actions taken by participants, in a web of relationships that unfolds in real time (Kac, 2005).

Kac's emphasis on dialogue and two-way exchanges disregards essentialist identities, while exposing the fragility and fluidity of meaning. His poetic explorations of signifying practices, geographic dislocations, and multi-positioned spectatorship, examine processes of identity constitution and fragmentation. The activism of his early porno-poetry performances on the Ipanema beach informs the cultural and ethical responsibility that characterizes his critical attitude: "If we don't question how technology affects our lives, if we don't take charge, if we don't use these technological media to raise questions about contemporary life, who is going to do it?" (Osthoff, 1996: 23).

Bruscky and Kac share this sense of responsibility in their engagement with art, which they have advanced primarily not as the production of physical objects, but rather as the examination of ideas, relationships, contexts, and consciousness. The live interventions they created in the 1970s and the 1980s were an integral part of the social, cultural, and political networks that give art meaning. During this period Bruscky and Kac sharpened the edge of artistic discourse by creating critical, humored, and performative cultural interventions—the very practice of freedom.

Figure 4. Eduardo Kac, *RC Robot*, telepresence work presented at the exhibition Brasil High-Tech, Galeria de Arte do Centro Empresarial Rio, Rio de Janeiro, 1986. Remote participants interacted with gallery viewers through the body of the telerobot. (Photo courtesy of Eduardo Kac)

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