

**Molior presents *Contrainte/Restraint***  
**New media arts practices from Brazil and Peru**

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## **HISTORICAL FALTERINGS & URBAN DYSTOPIA: Turning off, recording, transmitting, and lighting a city**

According to the latest national census, 27.8% of Peru's population is concentrated in Lima, with its 7,695,742 inhabitants in a 2,812 km<sup>2</sup> area (0.2% of the Peruvian territory).<sup>1</sup> Due to an accelerated migration process and population overflow, the city has spread within a few decades by developing important growth centers.<sup>2</sup> In the midst of this accelerated expansion, a chaos has taken shape in this national idiosyncrasy—arising from internal migrations driven by the violence of recent history—and configured this city as a synthesis of Peru: a model of civil society dissociated from the State<sup>3</sup> in which hybrid forms of development and modernity coexist.

This process has led to a radical transformation of the cityscape: environments of extreme poverty and wealth live side by side, historic buildings are recycled into makeshift buildings, and mass access to technology is provided by informal internet booths, pirated products and recycled electronics.

Recycling technologies and information is one of the defining characteristics of Peruvian media art. The various zones where technological recycling takes place in Lima make up a cyberpunk topography where self-styled electronic engineers sell robots by the side of mountains of electronic scrap. These "public laboratories" for materials and ideas are concentrated in the city's downtown.<sup>4</sup>

### **Blackout**

It would be hard to imagine how electronic artworks could have functioned in 1980s Peru. The constant terrorist attacks on electricity pylons would have caused these works to turn on and off, before completely breaking down.

Between 1980 and 1990 the country experienced a process of internal war to which Lima turned its back. The first contact with violence was via the media, mainly through the written press and television. The conflict then took to the city, turning the streets into areas of violence and death. *Matari 69200* by Rolando Sánchez, investigates the experience of public media in private space by referring to the imaginary and memory of a generation. The generation of artists gathered in *Restraint* lived a secluded life in private spaces delimited by screens (turned on, and then abruptly turned off by the explosions), which showed video games and cartoons interspersed with news segments about hyperinflation, epidemics, genocide and destruction.<sup>5</sup>

### **Paranoia**

The political regime of the 1990 decade began and ended on videotape. The period opened with the capture of Abimael Guzmán, the leader of the Shining Path terrorist group, and the dissemination of a video of him dancing *Zorba the Greek* with his top leadership. Another video closed the decade: the bribing of an elected congressman by the presidential advisor Vladimiro Montesinos, which was filmed by the Peruvian Intelligence department and then transmitted on television.<sup>6</sup> The broadcasting of this event changed the course of history by revealing a web of political and media corruption.

Deborah Poole describes the control of a "thousand-eyed" State that is omnipresent and omniscient. In the early 1990s television images of both known and suspected terrorists wandering through Lima's public spaces were frequently shown. These films were trying to bring home the idea that no individual walking along the streets could escape the eyes of the State. Through these type of reports the Fujimori regime

sought to convey the idea that the State had not only an unlimited capacity for surveillance, but also an arbitrary control over what people could see or not see.<sup>7</sup>

In *Stereo Reality Environment 3: Brutalism*, José Carlos Martinat appropriates an architecture that is emblematic of surveillance and power.<sup>8</sup> The artist generates new information by symbolically infiltrating the information control network of the Pentagonito ("little Pentagon" – the seat of the Army Intelligence Service and of the system of political corruption). The paranoia of control is reflected in the automatic launching of random information found in the network, and which falls printed into our hands.

As a consequence of this logic of state-directed surveillance and the conception of public space as a place of violence, the citizens of Lima live in a state of extreme fear and paranoia. Parks and squares are beginning to disappear in the city. Moreover, the privatization of public spaces according to upper class criteria has fostered a "ghetto and apartheid culture" cut off from a growing metropolis. Many streets are blocked by gates that protect houses, which have been converted into small bunkers watched over by unarmed guards. The "huachimán" (the hispanicized Peruvian form of "watchman") guards the properties from a precarious makeshift booth on the sidewalk. It is in this way that urban development patterns, which promote attitudes of withdrawal and distrust, have emerged.

Like the "huachimanes," the bushes in Gabriel Acevedo's video *Parálisis* have their trunks locked in by cement, yet they move about and catch our attention, letting us know that they are watching over us from their confined space. The shaking of these shrubs—controlled from the root to the crown—seems to replicate the citizens' psychological state: their feelings of paranoia and held back violence.

### **Lighting the City**

Whereas the 1980s and 1990s were marked by the erasure of public space due to violence and control policies, the 2000s gave rise to new public spaces in consumer centers and in media experiences. Department stores, screens and the internet have come to define new social attitudes. The new squares are the shopping malls; highways and chat rooms are the new traffic sites.

Consequently, the experience of screens, which define current media art practices, generates escape routes while also positioning one before a faltering reality, perceived more than ever as a mediated simulacrum. New media art appropriates the interfaces of power by transforming them and calling for a new public space of versatile platforms open to experience.

With *Satellite Cities* Nicole Franchy illustrates a new city of screens and information traffic flows. The city is viewed as a big screen of electronic circuit boards leading towards a standardized and dystopian horizon. Although the installation's interrupted dynamic refers back to mediated experience as isolation, it also offers us a panorama we are free to control: we can re-appropriate the lost territory.

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The control of the media and information traverse Peruvian history intermittently. Political powers' manipulation of reality through media platforms, the on/off electrical power supply due to terrorist bombs, and the video surveillance transmitted to State intelligence systems have constantly served as strategies to control and restrict public space.<sup>9</sup> The large-scale information access platforms, in combination with the

reworking of the dissemination of media recordings through art, have opened paths towards new points of convergence for communities and imaginaries, and indicated new potential ways of exercising power.

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<sup>1</sup> INEI – Instituto Nacional de Estadística e Informática (National Statistics and Data Processing Institute). August, 2008.

<sup>2</sup> Three large urban cones—North, East and South—have overcome the disastrous impact of a decade and a half of violence, becoming main bastions of economic development thanks to a substantial use of information and communication technologies in their social relations. José Matos Mar. *Desborde Popular y crisis del Estado. Veinte años después*, Lima: Fondo Editorial del Congreso, 2004.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid. p.148.

<sup>4</sup> It is worth highlighting recent institutional developments in this area, such as Escuelab (<http://www.escuelab.org/>), an educational and experimental creation laboratory.

<sup>5</sup> The event that radically changed the relationship of middle class Lima citizens to violence was a 1992 car bomb explosion in the residential zone of Tarata street, in the Miraflores neighbourhood.

"What it changed was the relationship of everyone with terrorism: from *having been* randomly in target range, to *being* the primary target." Max Hernández Calvo and Jorge Villacorta. *Franquicias Imaginarias. Las opciones estéticas en las artes plásticas en el Perú de fin de siglo*, Lima: Fondo Editorial de la Pontificia Universidad Católica del Perú, 2002. p. 98.

<sup>6</sup> The 90s was also a flourishing period for Peruvian video art production, a practice which is losing ground nowadays, since it is being displaced by more sophisticated media proposals.

<sup>7</sup> Deborah Poole. *Videos, corrupción y ocaso del Fujimorismo*, Lima: Instituto de Defensa Legal, 2008.

<sup>8</sup> During the years of military rule (1968-1979) an official style designated the architecture: "brutalism." Its aesthetic was functional and linked to modernism, and it took visible form in the construction of public buildings. *Post-Ilusiones/Nuevas Visiones:Arte Crítico en Lima (1980-2006)*, Lima: Fundación Augusto N. Wiese, 2006. p. 25

<sup>9</sup> Referring to Alberto Fujimori's dictatorial government's mass media control network, Rodrigo Quijano distinguishes between a repression of all forms of expression not subject to manipulation, and a planned media structure to extort and bribe newspapers and television channels. *Puntos Cardinales 2001. 4 artistas visuales peruanos*, Lima: Quidam, 2002.