

Interview: Mauricio Dias and Walter Riedweg

by Maaretta Jaukkuri



Mauricio Dias and Walter Riedweg have worked together since 1993. Their first collaborative project *Devotionalia* (1994-2004) was a collaboration with street children in Rio de Janeiro. Since then, Dias and Reidweg have worked with a variety of marginalized groups, including immigrants, prisoners, juvenile delinquents, janitors, street vendors, male prostitutes and visually impaired people. The artists' interest in the concept of "the other" and their wish to tell the stories of those considered to be "others" are the guiding forces in their work. At the time of this interview, Dias and Riedweg's work was on view in *same time else where* at Kunstneres Hus in Oslo.

Maaretta Jaukkuri: Where and when has your work been exhibited in the United States?

Mauricio Dias and Walter Riedweg: In 1996, Mary Jane Jacob and Homi Bhabha included our work in *Conversations at the Castle in Atlanta* and our work was also included in inSitesite 2000, an exhibition that takes place every year at the border between San Diego and Tijuana in California. In 2008, The Frye Museum for the Arts in Seattle will show *Funk Staden* (a work we presented at Documenta 12). In April 2009, we will have a solo show at The Americas Society in New York, curated by Gabriela Rangel.

MJ: Your work has been shown in venues throughout Europe, Latin

American, the United States and South America. Does the location of your exhibitions affect the reception of your work?

MD & WR: There are always differences in the reception of our work in different places. Reception of our work depends not only on the individual viewer, but also on the cultural and economic context in which the work is seen. In developing our work, we think about the context in which the work will be shown.

MJ: How is it to work in these different cultural contexts?

MD & WR: It is really stimulating for us to work in a variety of cultural contexts; we think it is important to work inter-territorially; for example, to produce a work in Egypt or Turkey and to then show it in Switzerland or in the US. Working in this way opens up new ways of thinking about existing situations. Misunderstandings and cultural clashes are vital to bringing about new ways of communicating and thinking.

MJ: Both ethical issues and aesthetic concerns are strongly present in your work. How do these issues and concerns effect your approach to art?

MD & WR: We believe art to be a tool to subvert culture, not just to serve it. People in the art world assume that the “intelligentsia” is restricted to those with money and appropriate education. Luckily, life has shown us that this is no more than a comfortable assumption of the bourgeoisie. There are many—we would say infinite—forms of intelligence among illiterate people, people in prison, people on the streets and in marginal contexts of society. Besides, in every institution, even in the worst ones, there’s always someone who still thinks and silently questions and these questions subvert the context or the system in which he or she operates. Luckily, we think we can still trust individualism and individual existence. Maybe we are just optimists, but why not? To be a pessimist does not make anybody more intelligent, only safer (at most).

MJ: A great deal of your artwork involves collaborative processes—not only between yourselves as artists but also with other people. How does collaboration shape your working process?

MD & WR: Negotiation is always present in any kind of collaboration—and these negotiations both interfere with and contribute to the process and to the final form of the work. These negotiations are part of the methodology.

When an artist is involved in a collaborative project, she or he has to abandon some of the modernist assumptions about what an artwork should be. For instance, it is necessary to abandon the idea of the artwork being the final container to explain everything, to include everything in

itself. In collaborative practices the artwork shall, above all else, serve as a platform to expand and reflect diverse points of view. Rather than resolve anything, the artwork shall evoke questions.

MJ: Your most recent work reveals a change in your approach. It seems that you have moved from working collaboratively with groups of people to staging groups of people in particular situations or events, as you have done recently in *Suitcases for Marcel* (2006-08) and *Funk Staden* (2007). Could you tell me what led you to this change in the focus of the work?

MD & WR: Perhaps the trend that you suggest in our work is, to a certain degree, verifiable, but it does not reflect a rule we have intended to maintain. What might now be different in our work is that we have found a particular way to use our cameras so that we can locate our work between documentary and fiction. We are storytellers, not documentary filmmakers. We have not changed the way we work, but there is more maturity in the way we tell stories now.

MJ: What are some issues you'd like to investigate through your work in the future?

MD & WR: We're interested in the idea that the concept of the other might be just a poetical/political assumption like all labels that we invent in order to live in any society. Our next project, *Little Stories of Modesty and Doubt*, will address this idea.

Maaretta Jaukkuri is a Finnish curator working as the artistic director at Kunsternes Hus in Oslo.

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