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THE VISUAL ACCENT AS STRATEGY:
INTERRUPTION AND DIFFERENTIATED
VIEWERSHIP IN RIVANE
NEUENSCHWANDER'S SUNDAY

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When I speak in this foreign place I cannot escape my accent. When you listen to me, you also cannot escape my accent; in fact, we are both co-implicated in its construction. My voice is us, together. When I speak, I am speaking my foreignness, my strangeness, my out-of-placeness, and my contextlessness. I am close and remote to you at the same time. You can hear my voice as accented because we are not from the same place. When I speak my accented voice I am speaking my difference.

When an accented subject speaks, both message and accent come through in her voice simultaneously. Every process of communication requires a context of enunciation; within it, the accent comes in as a twist, a discomfort, and a discontinuity. The voice travels from the mouth of the speaker to the ears of the listener, where the words are received and their inflection evaluated. The accent is always relative; the speaker's accent will exist only if it differs from that of the listener's. For an accented speaker to exist, a non-accented listener is required. The accent materializes the context, leading the interlocutors to negotiate their presence in relation to one another, and to the space in which they are inscribed.

The accent is an element that foregrounds what is true for language at large. It is always already defined within a social context. For semiotician Mikhail Bakhtin, language is not only words, but their combination with the context of enunciation, the two together defining the formation of an "utterance."¹ Words are not discrete entities operating in a void; when spoken, they come into the social, economic, and political frames of the world, which provide a context for the interaction between speaker and listener to happen. Thus, sociality is intrinsic to language; the role of the accent is to make it evident.

For the utterance, an accent operates as a rupture of the continuity between word and context. The accent reveals the original conditions of language, highlighting the extraverbal content of an utterance, making the social evident in the context of enunciation. In fact, the accent is individual and social at the same time, offering the notion of a culturally defined personal rhythm that accompanies speech. Through the accent, the remote is brought into the familiar.

This essay proposes to take the accent—considering all the

¹ Mikhail Bakhtin, *Discourse in Life and Discourse in Poetry: Questions of Sociological Poetics* [1926] (Oxford: PT Publications, 1983), 5.

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complexities of language it brings forward—and expand it as a critical term into the field of visual art. When considering art as a form of language, the migration of the concept of accent becomes purposeful. The linguistic model of the speaker-and-listener exchange creates a parallel with the co-implicated role of the artist, the viewer, and the context of enunciation. The construction and display of the accented work are seen as moments when the sociality of these processes come forth. For the visual accent, the shift from linguistics into visuality is key, turning the accent itself into a foreign, migrating stranger in this new field. In the space of the visual, the accent is a stranger.

Rivane Neuenschwander, born in Brazil in 1967, is an artist who straddles between internationality and extreme locality in her career. This accented in-betweenness is visible in her production, making her a generative case in which to consider the role of the visual accent. This always-contextual twisting accent offers a critical and multilayered approach to her work, already transitional and translational, centered on the disparities of language, measuring systems, and rules. This essay proposes a project of detail, of constant reconsideration, of spinning terminology on its head, willing to consider all of the possibilities entailed by the visual accent in relation to her work.

In *Accented Cinema*, film scholar Hamid Naficy offers a seminal critical text from which the accent sprouts into the field of visuality. Centering on the maker of a film, as this essay centers on the visual artist, Naficy argues that “authors exist outside and prior to films.” This is a central consideration for a displaced maker that is forced to develop a fragmented and multilingual style. The continuous simultaneity of experience within the accented film insists on marking the sociality in the creator’s accented experience of the world.

Rivane Neuenschwander is an accented maker living between London and São Paulo. She developed an international career after studying art in Belo Horizonte, Brazil, in the 1990s. Her work offers a poetic deconstruction and reconstruction of forms determined by social standards for language, cartography, and memory, locating her accentedness in an exploratory production that looks at the maker as much as to the audience. A work that is already critical of

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and playful with language proves to be ideal for this project.

In 2010, Neuenschwander created *Sunday*, a five minute and seventeen second video made in collaboration with her brother, the neuroscientist Sergio Neuenschwander. *Sunday* is an accented utterance in which the accent is understood in relation to the artist as speaker, the audience as listener, and the exhibition space as the context of enunciation. The accent can be located in all or none of these points at once (fig. 1).

As *Sunday* begins, the viewer has the impression of having stumbled upon a quotidian domestic situation, just a given Sunday—the slow day of rest and leisure. The space is not remarkable: a radio sits on a shelf at the back of a room, and a few homely elements are distributed in the space; a potted plant sits next to the radio, while a red broom rests in the corner. In the foreground is a green Amazon parrot perched on a branch in an open cage. The radio inundates the scene with a male voice that narrates a football (soccer) match. The parrot moves around the cage, eating (fig. 2).

Suddenly a close-up of the parrot's beak breaks the sense of quotidian familiarity. These are not just any seeds; they have been inscribed with symbols and punctuation marks. This unexpected detail in such an expected environment suddenly disorients the viewer, generating an immediate break. Fifty seconds into the video, the entire mood of the scene has shifted with a parrot that enjoys the feast of commas, question marks, and parentheses. Throughout the remaining four minutes of the video, the parrot continues to eat. As the parrot continues to devour the seeds, the narrator's words are affected, mixing and confusing the narration until it becomes an incomprehensible, unpunctuated gibberish.

Sunday is a snippet of a specific "Brazil" that can be seen and heard by the viewer. This is an explicitly accented video used strategically by Neuenschwander as a space of empowerment, performance, and critique. Heavily stereotypical "Brazilian" elements, such as a parrot and football, coexist with unexpected actions, such as the eating of seeds inscribed with punctuation. The interaction between all of these elements materializes accentedness.

Sunday is constituted by stereotypical elements that explicitly read as "Brazilian," namely the parrot and the football match. On the one hand, the parrot reads as Brazilian because it is actually native to the region, and it also does so visually because the

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Figures 1,2,4,7: Rivane Neuenschwander in collaboration with Sergio Neuenschwander, *Sunday*, 2010. HD video projection, 5 min, 17 sec. Edition of 8; 2Aps. Courtesy of the artist and Tanya Bonakdar Gallery, New York.



Figure 3: Walt Disney's Zé Carioca, created in 1942. Credit: Walt Disney



colors of the Brazilian flag echo its vivid blue, yellow, and green feathers. But the fact that the parrot is heavily visually accented also depends on filmic historical constructions, a larger context of enunciation that is emphasized by the accent (fig. 3).

The viewer might see the parrot and also see Walt Disney's Zé Carioca (which translates as "Joe from Rio de Janeiro"). This character was created in the 1940s as part of Franklin Delano Roosevelt's "Good Neighbor" policy. Nelson Rockefeller, as coordinator of Inter-American Affairs in the U.S. Department of State, led the cultural programs, in an attempt to introduce South American culture to a United States audience. Among the many cultural projects funded was a trip to the region by Walt Disney and his crew from which came two great hits: *Saludos Amigos* (1942) and *Los Tres Caballeros* (1944). Zé Carioca was the main character of both films, serving as a tour guide for Donald Duck around the Americas. After the release of two films, the character became extremely famous in Brazil, expanding from the films into different circulations, such as a comic-book version that runs to this day. Neuenschwander has directly referenced the character in her work before,² using it to show how an image of a playful, funny, and rogue character was imposed on Brazilian culture by a foreign force, and, more importantly, how it stuck (fig. 4).

More broadly, beyond the cultural specificity of Zé Carioca, parrots have been defined by their capacity to imitate human speech. Because of this ability, parrots usually operate symbolically as mirroring characters, bouncing back the sounds they have been trained to replicate, and receiving treats in compensation. But strategically, Neuenschwander's parrot is not performing this expected role. *Sunday's* main character is not such a parrot. In a sense, this parrot is misbehaving: eating all the treats in its cage, it does not speak to the audience. Contrastingly, the overflow of treats in turn creates a complete absence of speech. With this central gesture, the artist has broken expectations; the parrot will not perform for the audience, but decides to indulge in the meticulous and repetitive act of eating the seeds instead. The amount of seeds the parrot eats goes beyond reward and nourishment into excess and gluttony.

The radio in the background and the sound coming from it convey a second Brazilian stereotype: football. The rhythm and

2. Neuenschwander's *Zé Carioca Series* (2003) is a central work in this context, where the artist used the comic-book pages as surfaces where she used the background colors to cover up the comic interactions between the characters, composing a grid of bright

colors. The work nods to constructivist painting and to abstraction, as well as to popular culture, in an empowering subversion of Disney's essentializing trope.

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tone of the narrator, in conjunction with the cheering crowd, allow the viewer to construct an image of a football match. At the same time, the black-and-white seeds in the cage, appearing against the parrot's feathers, are reminiscent of the ball rolling on the green grass. The parrot becomes the football players, wearing a matching verde-amarela uniform of "La Canarina."³ The bodies of the players are decidedly absent, but their presence is conjured.

At this point, a viewer who shares the codes and speaks Portuguese will be able to listen to the voice and understand the details of the match. This is where a second break occurs, strategically dividing the accented and the unaccented viewers, creating barriers of comprehension through language. While certain viewers will only get an overall sense of the football match through the cadence of the voice, the Brazilian Portuguese-speaking viewers will recognize its specificity: it is not any match, but the 2002 World Cup Final (fig. 5).

This is a particularly emblematic match, a symbolic moment that the artist selected with detail. In this match, Brazil beat Germany, ratifying its superiority in the sport as the world's longtime champion, and becoming a World Cup victor for the fifth time. The voice in the radio is not narrating just any game, but an instance of Brazilian splendor. The sociologist Roberto DaMatta has analyzed football as game in which Brazilian identity is constructed: "In order to triumph, a football player (like a samba dancer) must have *jogo de cintura*, the capacity to use the body to provoke confusion and fascination in the public and in their adversaries."⁴ Brazilian football has been defined by this distinctively playful and responsive style, in which success comes from bewildering the opponent and breaking the rules without being discovered.

In a tactical move, every step is valuable, and this is the case for *Sunday*. The references Neuenschwander is mobilizing go beyond football, given that in Brazil the game itself goes beyond the field; as sociologists understand, it is a performance of culture. Football presents the free, strategic, resourceful body in the form of the Brazilian player, flexible and always in motion (fig. 6).

In *Sunday*, Neuenschwander is performing a conceptual *jogo de cintura*, a symbolic play of the hips that is ultimately a strategic performance of culture and expectations. Her movements are at the same time like dancing samba and dribbling a ball, strategically

3. This is one of the nicknames for the Brazilian national football team, whose uniform colors resemble those of a canary, or, in this context, a parrot.

4. Roberto DaMatta, *Sport in Society: An Essay on Brazilian Football* (VIRANT 612): 28.

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Figure 5: The Brazilian National Football team celebrates their triumph in the 2002 Korea-Japan World Cup Final. Credit: Alex Livesey, Getty Images Sport



Figure 6: Performing *jogo de cintura*, Brazilian player Rivaldo breaks through German players Ramelow and Schneider in the 2002 World Cup Final, Yokohama International Stadium, Japan. Credit: AllStar Picture Library.

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repositioning her against the narrowing expectations of an essentializing adversary—that powerful Hollywoodesque other that names and caricatures. That is, she takes her inescapable accent and mobilizes it in her favor.

But the strategic *jogo de cintura* is accessible only to certain viewers who share the artist's accent. In this video, Neuenschwander has created a moment of viewership in which the audience evaluates their position in relation to the work, becoming aware of their own personal belonging or not belonging to the conversation, to the space, and to the narrative. The viewers become aware of their standing in relation to the work. Somehow, the artist's accented utterance has foregrounded the social context in which the viewers are inscribed. By implicating the audience to this degree, exactly like the accent that exists in the listener's ear, the artist has made evident that viewing itself is also an act of participation; viewing is performative.

This duplicity of experience for the viewer of the artwork happens in relation to the context of enunciation, which for an artwork becomes the exhibition space itself. In the case of Neuenschwander, the exhibition of her work happens in a globalized art-world setting. The global context allows for a multiplicity of viewerships to be held simultaneously because of the plurality of the audience. A diversity of personal accents is met with a specific one, and depending on this encounter, comprehension will be different.

Film scholars Ella Shohat and Robert Stam have explored the moving image in its globalized setting of production and distribution. In *Multiculturalism in the Postmodern Age*, they acknowledge how a plurality of audiences produces a plurality of experiences. They explain: "Screening films for mixed audiences [...] can create a gap between cultural 'insiders' who laugh at the jokes and recognize the references, and the 'outsiders' who experience an abrupt dislocation," being "reminded of the limits of their own knowledge and indirectly of their own potential status as foreigners."⁵ Yes, everyone can see the image, but only a few can glean the references and ultimately understand the layers of meaning embedded in them. This is the strategic power of an accented artwork. It points at the limits of each viewer's comprehension, marking the distance another language can create.

In *Sunday*, Neuenschwander is also hinting at the fact that

5. Ella Shohat and Robert Stam, "Multiculturalism in the Postmodern Age," *Unthinking Eurocentrism: Multiculturalism and the Media* (New York: Routledge, 1994), 355.

this image has been composed. Beyond the sense of quotidian domesticity, the unexpectedness of the setting attests to its own construction. The artist is both hinting at the hand of the maker, and denying the human body visually, replacing it with the voice of a narrator, and the parrot that refuses to speak, that refuses to be “human.” Other elements hint at a body that has recently left the space—the broom resting in the corner, the radio playing, the careful inscriptions on the seeds become tangible echoes of the artist’s hand-editing, staging, constructing, directing, cutting. The fact that the game was played eight years prior to the making of the video is another evidence of the construction of the image. Even the effect the parrot has in the decomposition of the voice evidences the artist’s manipulation of every detail. *Sunday* insists on itself being a delicate, constructed gesture, but this is evident only to some viewers that share Neuenschwander’s accent.

Every element in the video is taken over by the inscribed seeds. The punctuation marks and other symbols that are drawn on the seeds are the visual representation of silences or absences. These marks are inserted in written form to open up prose, providing room for pause and breath, which ultimately facilitates comprehension. These marks lay out the sound cues—pauses, breaks, exclamations—that regulate the overflow of spoken language. If these marks are removed, comprehension is hampered and language runs freely. In *Sunday*, the parrot is eating them away. Dismissing their authority, the parrot pierces through the marks, literally emptying them of content. It is slowly eating away the methodical technique of the punctuation marks, leaving only the unruly playfulness of incomprehensible language.

The act of devouring performed by the parrot is yet another hint for certain viewers, a discrete yet powerful conceptual citation. Devouring is a gesture of empowerment in Brazilian artistic tradition, and Neuenschwander’s reference is not gratuitous. *Sunday’s* is an anthropophagic parrot, reminiscent of the “Antropofagia” movement of Brazil in the 1920s and 1930s. This movement, led by artist Oswald de Andrade, who published the “Manifesto Antropófago” in 1928, appropriated the colonialist notion of the cannibal that had been imposed on Brazilian culture by the foreign European eyes who observed traditions in these lands. The exoticizing notion of the cannibal was appropriated and overturned by

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this avant-garde movement. For Antropofagia, Brazilian modernity was a digestion of European tradition and an excretion of it in a new, local form. Through this anthropophagic movement, Brazilian-ness was constructed as a strategic artistic national identity.

In *Sunday*, Brazil wins—not only the team that actually won the match itself, but the self-identified idea of Brazil takes over. Antropofagia, a regenerative and empowering concept, is offering a reconsideration of the character's role, from object of observation and study to subject with agency and power. The anthropophagic Brazilians win, as the parrot continues to devour those dogmatic markers of silence.

Neuenschwander marshals a series of subtle rhetorical maneuvers, from the artist to the viewer, eventually turning the stereotypes around and conveying a critical message. By pointing at the mechanisms by which images are constructed and culture is performed, Neuenschwander is offering accented viewers a possibility of dislocation from within. She will be the expected Brazilian artist, giving us a playful parrot and a football game, but in doing so, she will propose that even the smallest of details are a space where the viewer is implicated, and where culture, history, and power reside. In *Sunday*, Neuenschwander is offering a way to navigate these suffocating structures skillfully and pleasingly, proposing at the same time both a bewildering sequence of stereotypical images for one viewer, and a liberating strategy of response for another. Neuenschwander brings the unexpected inside the familiar, demonstrating that powerful critical ruptures have to come from within (fig 7).

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Figures 1.2.4.7: Rivane Neuenschwander in collaboration with Sergio Neuenschwander: *Sunday*, 2010. HD video projection, .5 min, 17 sec. Edition of 8; 2Aps. Courtesy of the artist and Tanya Bonakdar Gallery, New York

