

What is...? [O que é...]

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The question posed by Ricardo Basbaum opens a space of indetermination and possibilities. It remains to investigate them in the intersections and approaches of referential works, from his participation in the exhibition *Como vai você, Geração 80?* ["How Are You, 80s Generation?"] forty years ago to the unreleased series *acordes#1-24* (2024). The intersections, transitions, and flows between diagrams, a closed-circuit TV system, sound compositions, unpredictable choreographies, installations, and photographic records, all gathered and arranged by the artist himself, culminate in a meta-installation that prompts further questions. Most importantly, it provides insight into Basbaum's refined critical trajectory in his exploration of language, situated at the intersection of thought and action.

Continuous, dashed, wavy lines, dots, knots, signals, angles, words, questions, and sinuous voids occupy the entire opening wall of *O que é...?* [*What is...?*]. In *diagrama (mais de mil)* (2016), sometimes they refer to artistic practice, other times to poetic or conceptual speculations. They make visible, on an architectural scale, the intangible flows of ideas, temporalities, and possibilities of action and ex/spectation — a reciprocal anticipation between artist and spectator (RB). *diagrama (mais de mil)* contains fragments of *NBP – Novas Bases Para a Personalidade* [*New Bases for Personality*], a verbo-visual proposition from 1990 disseminated in unexpected configurations. The linear rectangle with beveled angles and a central circle adheres to various surfaces, marks the existing furniture in the gallery, bounces in the *diagrama (o som da teoria)* (2023), or invades art history, as in the script for *collective conversation (the school of kyiv)* (2015), created and presented in Kiev, where the young Malevich taught: "Fold the black square/ Fold the black square onto itself/ Dissolve the black square/ Make a hole in the center of the black square/ Tear the black square from its white background and cast it into the world."

The NBP sign, plotted on the gallery floor, delineates a passageway between rooms, captured by *sistema-cinema*: a closed-circuit television system displayed in real-time on a monitor accessible to all. As Brian Holmes observed in 2006, "*sistema-cinema* enhances my perception of the space while also recording images, furnishing material for future proposals and adding a further set of references — technological this time — for the comprehension of the environment you are temporarily inhabiting." The spatial configuration of *sistema-cinema* disrupts the control structure and offers hybrid, biotechnological visual approaches that enhance self-awareness. Basbaum moves between borders, mapping fissures and transitions, inhabiting the "in-between" with a poetic-reflective tactic that articulates text and image, participatory actions, and forms of micro-activism (Guattari) that resist the Society of Control. In a process analogous to Gilles Deleuze's Cartographies, where there is no predetermined path or single entry point, the work clusters established in relation to architecture redirect the observer/participant to the web of poetic-conceptual relationships that activate the works gathered in *What is...?*

A set of objects composed of industrial iron structures, the architectural-sculptural piece *conjunto* (2011), occupies the center of one of the rooms. Three benches with cushions, a small obstacle to jump over, and a fence with the NBP shape, meant to be crossed, propose a choreography inevitably performed by the body of the spectator/participant. On one of the walls, the phrases "Who, me?" and "Yes, we were already expecting you." highlight the complementarity between Basbaum's propositions and the Other. It is in this encounter that new subjectivities simultaneously emerge: those of the artist and the participant. Moreover, as a tactic of resistance, the openness to multiple participants creates a collective, possibly reversing the isolation of the *self*, which then perceives itself in relation to *others*.

Presented simultaneously, the painting *paisagem x3-pressionista* (1986) featuring an iconic eye at its center and a small conceptual drawing displaying it alongside its TV broadcast revisit crucial aspects of Basbaum's poetics. The (unrealized) installation emerges as a deviant mechanism that highlights the thickness and naturalized limits of mass media. This installation project harks back to Basbaum's precise participation in the exhibition *How Are You, 80s Generation?* where he placed a schematic pair of adhesive eyes on a large vase with plants in the inner courtyard of the School of Visual Arts at Parque Lage. This specific intervention immediately activates the vase's handles as ears, the plants as hair, and inverts the relationship between observer and observed. As demonstrated by the wheatpaste poster included in *What is... ?*, the bizarre face looks at us, changing the scale of the visual field. With a touch of humor, it reverses the Duchampian principle and "removes the object from indifference" (RB). However, it maintains an attentive and broadened gaze towards the field of inscription of the work: the exhibition itself, the institutional context, and the art circuit or system, which then begins to take shape in Rio de Janeiro. Counter to the prevailing commercial slogans surrounding painting at the time, Basbaum engages with a segment of Brazilian art that, in the 1970s, conceptually rearticulated the issue of spectator participation in the work of art, as seen in the works of Hélio Oiticica and Lygia Clark — artists who, in the 1960s, confronted the institutional field from a marginal perspective. Early on, he identifies the link between textual production and experimental practice. On the cusp of the decade when Deleuze identifies the historical shift to the society of control (1990), this critical stance distances itself from the stereotypes of its own time, appropriates fragments from previous generations, and carves out its own path. Rooted in the local context, the artist's movement soon extends globally, as he moves to study in London.

Later, with the positioning of a single open eye overlooking the campus from the UNICAMP tower, this critical-experimental field is extended by a community debate that, for Basbaum, requalifies the symbolic function of the eye as a communication tool that generates questions — "is it the question? is it a question or not?" — a mechanism that reappears in the title and in his occupation process at the Marli Matsumoto Contemporary Art Gallery. Since the decisive historical transition marked by the political opening of the 1980s and, subsequently, globalization, the internal fracture between a new generation interested in painting and pop culture and the previous, so-called conceptual one, remained open. Basbaum chooses to inhabit this gap. Four decades later, he maintains a rare position as an artist where solid engagement in the theoretical-critical field converges with artistic practice and language research. As he states, this convergence allows for a productive slippage between various sectors of the art circuit and the university.

With numerous exhibitions in Brazil and abroad, as well as his roles as a professor and researcher at the UFF, curatorial projects, and publications (such as *Manual do artista-etc.*, 2013), Basbaum maps fractures and proposes shifts in the processes of domination. Through a singular poetic-reflective tactic, he articulates thought as a verbo-visual practice, proposes participatory actions, and initiates micro-activist triggers. In a weaving of temporalities and the juxtaposition of sound, verbal, and visual layers inherent to his propositions and installations, the series *Olho*; *Sistema-Cinema*; *Diagramas*; *Estruturas Arquitetônico-Escultóricas*; *Conversas-Coletivas*; and the new *accordes#1-24* — conceived since 1990 as unfoldings of the NBP project — create connections, activate gaps, pose new questions, and provoke unexpected shifts.

The observation of *diagrama (tríades NBP)* (2014), following the entire trajectory of *What is...?*, leads back to practices, concepts, connections, and gaps opened throughout Basbaum's extensive career. Initially organized into three topics that suggest a temporal arrangement and are grounded in the data produced from the critical exercise of the work itself, this diagram triggers a complex interplay of triadic relationships that tends to subvert the elucidatory function of any mapping. However, navigating the densely intersected lines of color, the reinvented (glued, inverted) words, and terms that engage with theory, art history, and culture (adverse jelly; transcending, transparent concepts) leads to the pleasurable rhythm of the game of finding (or losing) connections. The first item in this diagram points to a decisive shift in the artist's position within the art system: the text "What is NBP?" — linked to the recurring rectangular sign. Yet, *What is... ?* sustains a gap that returns and revisits the text, specifically the third of the three vector ideas of the acronym, the instant logos: "a visual knowledge ... overwhelming, sudden, engaging, immediate, instantaneous ... within the instantaneity ... Let yourself be contaminated."

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In *O que é...? [What is...?]*, I present a selection of works created between 1984 and 2024, some shown to the public for the first time, and others rarely seen. The presented trajectory involves the use of various media and resources, reflecting my ongoing interest in crafting interventions closely aligned with the communicative field. Techniques of repetition, recursive structures, and mobilization of discourse into devices of visuality, sound, and orality, are adopted and employed. The *Olho [Eye]* (1984) sign recalls my work in the 1980s, evoking a connection with cultural industries and the society of control. It responds to the crisis of values in the face of habitual and consumerist automatism, paving the way for the development of the *NBP – Novas Bases para a Personalidade [New Bases for Personality]* project starting in 1990: since then, I have been deepening the conceptual layers of the work, moving through a recurring and repetitive sign that is visual, verbal, and therefore also sound. The strong orality present in videos and diagrams is also a tool for collective works that mobilize the voice as an index of encounters and clashes — between bodies and the physical presence of the works, as well as among the participants themselves. Visitors are invited into a performative experience that doesn't allow for passivity, as they engage with the works through actions like 'sit, jump, cross,' but also walking, listening, reading, and viewing, all while moving. *What is...?* aims to connect with visitors, creating varying levels of closeness and distance from the objects, sounds, and images, as well as from the very concept of an exhibition as a dynamic space for sensory engagement: the idea is that the question should be built close to the skin, in the thrill of encountering things — "what is...?" posed as an open-ended inquiry, serves as a prompt for the continuous creation of wonder in every moment of the living body's action, in a non-conformist manner.

Ricardo Basbaum