

# The Revenge of Low-tech

## Autolabs, Telecentros and Tactical Media in São Paulo

RICARDO ROSAS

### The Context of the Tactical Media Lab in Brazil

In *Johnny Mnemonic*, William Gibson writes about an obscure group of people, the Lo-Teks. Lo-Teks are people who live at the margins of a high-tech society in the near future. These people have their own peculiar weapons, even if they're made of discarded tech-residua of the overdeveloped society of their time.

But why talk about low technology nowadays? Tactical media practitioners mostly like to think about action when it's mediated by a very high-tech device, which they can learn or teach others how to use. That's how it works; that is what you usually get to understand when reading *Nettime* or tactical media theory texts all over the web. But such an approach only works if you are talking about a very rich country that has a large number of people who have access to the internet or to high-tech gadgets. And what if you are a tactical media practitioner living in an 'underdeveloped' country like Brazil?

As far as we know, the Next Five Minutes Festival is a kind of umbrella-like coming together of DIY, activist and tactical media producers. If the point is to talk about Brazilian DIY media and arts in the context of the Next Five Minutes, then basically we have to talk about low-tech.

So let's begin with a cliché: Brazil is a land of contrasts. That's what everybody says, be it a foreigner who comes here for the first time, be it a Brazilian theoretician in his comfortable seat at a university. Even in the richest city of the country, São Paulo, you can see beggars guiding their wooden garbage recycling carts as they walk through the gigantic Paulista Avenue, with its impressive skyscrapers of glass and steel. This is a country where you can find very rich boys with lots of high-tech gizmos, the latest ones from Japan, living very near a homeless family which has nothing to eat. Yes, there is lots of net stuff here, lots of web designers, programmers, software experts, web writers, bloggers, and so. Our cyberspace is full of beautiful home pages, full of e-commerce, full of 'cool' hackers, but, coming back to reality, if you keep your eyes wide open, if you walk a little bit (or a little more!), you can see violence, hunger, ugliness, all the things found in a supposedly Third World country. To complicate the picture further, the mediascape in Brazil is dominated by giant media monopolies that articulate the interests of the elite and work towards maintaining the appearance of a complacent consensus, even in the face of intense social con-

flict. Immersed as many Brazilians are in this mediatized consensus populated by the stars of *'telenovelas'* (Brazilian sitcoms) and variety shows, critical views and perspectives on the media tend to be very marginal and few.

How could a Brazilian TML (Tactical Media Lab) dialogue with such different cultures and bring the virtual and the real together in a common space? We were clear in our minds that while translating the Tactical Media Lab and its concept to a Brazilian reality, we would never, throughout the entire process of creating the TML, shut our eyes to our ground realities. We also knew that this would be even more difficult if we had to talk about net art and net activism.

There is a culture of 'web-art' in Brazil – a very alienated, self-referential kind of practice, mostly related to technology for technology's sake. The 'web-artists', not unlike most artists in general, are much more worried about their own egos, and very distant from the everyday reality that surrounds them. Most of them don't even know about net art (in, say, *Nettime's* terms), net activism, or tactical media. Political issues are something totally ignored in their works, and the situation gets a little worse when you discover that the ones who do know about such things don't care too much about letting others know what they know. It seems they are not interested in doing this; it rocks their status quo. As people say, information is power; so why not be privileged?

Actually, the picture of new media culture in Brazil is not as simple as I have just made it out to be. Brazil is also notorious (or famous) for its hacking scene. Piracy is also a very hot issue nowadays, as pirated software and music CDs are the easiest thing to find in the '*camelos*' - the little tents that crowd the streets' 'black' markets.

Independent media undertakings are also not something entirely new in Brazil. During the last dictatorship, in the 1970s, lots of alternative magazines, the '*imprensa nanica*' (small press) produced innumerable zines and *samizdat* literature that generated a sort of a counterculture. However, from the 1980s onwards this movement was gradually reduced to a pop market of 'fan' publishing. The renewal of critical or agitprop-like media culture only happened again in the late 1990s, following the worldwide wave of the so-called 'anti-globalization' protests. Cyber-activism too has consistently been on the rise ever since the appearance of the Brazilian Indymedia portal in late 2001. Before 2001, there were very few sites producing independent news and information, one of them being *Rizoma* ([www.rizoma.net](http://www.rizoma.net)), which tried to establish a sort of digital counterculture in Brazil (like *Disinfo.com* in its early, 'good' days). So, after 'our' Indymedia started, its incisive media activism paved the way for the spread of a great network of leftist and activist web sites. Such things had never been seen before in Brazilian cyberspace. There were also some slightly hacktivist groups such as the one called 'Microphobia', which tended however to be very difficult to find or contact.

Apart from this, a few important advances had been made and continue to be made in cities such as Porto Alegre and São Paulo (both these cities are governed by PT - The Workers Party), where the initiative to create Linux-based computer centres, called *Telecentros*, located in working class suburbs may well become the first step in what could be a 'utopian' virtual democracy in Brazil (*Telecentros* are discussed in detail below).

It was against this background that we set ourselves the task of designing the TML in

Brazil. We were clear from the beginning that we wanted to respond to the 'here and now' of our reality. Accordingly, we decided not to invite mainstream Brazilian 'web-artists', whose practice is very distant to everything we understand as 'tactical media'. We tried to look for groups whose practice could have web-based components, but at the same time were not fixated on high-tech. Such groups (regardless of whether they defined themselves as 'artists' or 'activists') were spread all over Brazil. Some were prolific producers, some were part of an 'underground' culture, and there was so much difference and diversity between the different groups that it sometimes appeared as if their practices were antithetical to each other. The TML embraced a wide spectrum, from art/activist groups and collectives to djs and street theater performances. Here is a brief description of some of the groups that were active in our TML.

Groups like Bijari/Antipod and *A Revolução Nao Sera Televisada* (The Revolution Will Not Be Televised) work mainly with video art and video activism. Their aesthetic emerges from an MTV-influenced collage style full of edgy political and artistic content. *Rejeitados* ('The Rejected') is a national 'combo' of alternative artists whose work focuses on urban interventions and art outside the institutions. *Formigueiro* (Ant's Nest) works with plagiarism and parody, and their exhibition played with fake biotech art. *Museu da Pessoa* (Museum of the Person) collects individual stories and photographs/videos of ordinary and anonymous people. *Anomia* (Anomy) works with culture-jamming, comics, zines and video, (influenced by psychogeography and sonic shock). *A Cria* (The Baby) is a 'factory' of fanzines. The Nomads' Collective work with architecture and popular solutions for living and habitation. Projeto Sid Moreira – whose name is a parodic reference to a TV news anchor on the giant Globo TV News Network – works with posters and culture-jamming. *Metafora.org* (Metaphor) recycles old computers for disadvantaged communities and develops wiki-based projects that centre on open publishing and group-based actions like *Recicle-1-Politico* (Recycle-1-Politician), which re-uses the trash residue of paper ad material from political campaigns. *Rizoma.net* practices what they call 'conceptual engineering' in order to transform subjectivities by re-combinations of online textual content, in order to arrive at an open source-inspired treatment of ideas drawn from activism, afrofuturism, and neuropolitics

Besides these groups and their presentations, the TML saw the creation of giant anti-war cartoons, info rooms created by Indymedia Brazil activists, street journals and 'Telecentros', designers and programmers collectives like Banda Paralela, who created a media monster made out of tech-detritus, and martial art/dance groups like *Batucacao* as well as alternative/experimental or 'home made' music labels like LSD Disco and free radio stations like Radio Muda.

All these people 'settled' at *Casa das Rosas* (House of Roses), which is a venue for non-mainstream art exhibitions on Paulista Avenue, something like a "castle" in Peter Lamborn Wilson's terms. We had the run of the house for four days, during which we not only had an exhibition – that looked more like a weird fair or TAZ – but also pocket music shows, performances, (unplanned and spontaneous) parties and a temporary pirate radio station that defied the repressive policies with regard to 'free radio stations' in Brazil. It was also important that all this was happening at the heart of Brazil's financial district. We also tried to host a free rave (in collaboration with Interfusion, a free party group that promotes

raves for free in the poor suburbs of São Paulo).

At the same time, many theoreticians, activists and artists presented lectures, participated in debates, conferences and workshops during the four days of the TML in a building next to the Casa das Rosas. Among other things, they debated and discussed independent media, art as tactic and resistance, the politics of multitudes, cyberactivism, copyleft, open-source philosophy, post-media sounds, free radios and independent music production.

The TML was not flush with funds, and that is why everyone chipped in and worked voluntarily. Most of the participants produced low-tech works and actions in actual space, even if, paradoxically, many of them were part of a closely inter-linked online, internet driven community. Most of the groups were marginal in relation to the mainstream of art or political discourse. And, in a way, it was a revenge: an act of revenge against the self-indulgent, high-tech, web-artists and techno-fetishistic elite in Brazil which is interested only in its own obsessive egoism. A revenge of low-tech!

A major concern, both in terms of concrete actions as well as theory, and a hot topic of discussion at the TML was the question as to whether the media monopolies in Brazil could be effectively challenged. Many of us at the TML felt that the challenge could lie in and through a practice centred on 'Autolabs'. The remainder of this essay is devoted to an elaboration of the concept and working of Autolabs.

### **What are Autolabs?**

Autolabs are laboratorial prototypes for media literacy, technological experimentation and creativity created with the help of local communities. Autolabs are based on 'tactical' concepts, and use cheap DIY media made accessible by the digital revolution. They are geared towards enabling independent media production (by individuals or collectives) using free software/open source operating systems. Autolabs are centres of orientation, documentation and self-education with free and open access to anyone who wants to come and work/play/create in them. In an 'Autolab', knowledge is accessed and shared through human mediation, collective work and creative participation.

The new global economy and new technologies demand a renewal of skills and a sharpening of communicative competences, a refinement of the practices of reading and writing. Autolabs attempt to face these challenges through networked, cooperative learning and shared hypermedia use in sound, radio, graphics and web production with people who normally cannot afford to use communication technologies. The labs interact with various autonomous social initiatives, articulating a lively, organic and nomadic mode of functioning that mobilizes actions on the basis of collective strategies of creation.

Among other things, Autolabs plan to generate new practices, new forms of work, focusing on new media as a means of action and the transformation of the world. This means opening up new spaces for cultural, artistic and media interaction, creating forms of access to knowledge resources for individuals or groups excluded from the new paradigm raised by the technological revolution, proposing useful ways of integrating informational technology and the needs of a given community, promoting the exchange of experiences (ideas, perceptions, insights) and the democratic collectivization of information, creating new spaces for political participation on the territories charted by the information

revolution, developing visual, sonic and textual sensitivities, and making social actions of collective utility possible.

### **The Functioning of the Autolabs**

But how will all this be done? And how is it being done? According to Giseli Vasconcelos, an artist and tactical media projects coordinator who laid the conceptual foundation of the Autolabs, the project was conceived to last between six to nine months, and it had already begun working in July 2003 with 300 youngsters between seventeen and twenty-one years old from three poor districts of São Paulo's periphery: São Miguel Paulista, Ermelino Matarazzo and Itaquera.

The workshops are divided into four different teaching units:

- >> Technical learning of computer maintenance and assembly of recycled hardware.
- >> Computer literacy for independent media, mobilization and online collaboration through drupal, wikis and mailing lists as well as the knowledge of the principles of free software and copyleft.
- >> Electronic media production through design experimentation and graphic publishing as well as production of content through digital story-telling.
- >> Sound production, free radio/web radio programming and CD editing/authoring.

All these units remain open to the possibility of a dialogue between themselves through the integration of workshop processes in a phased manner. These processes are registered and articulated by workshop co-ordinators (monitors in Portuguese) who document and evaluate all the processes and actions in an integrated manner. All participants collaborate in this and it results in the generation of a general project/product – a website.

The website is seen as the online ambience that concentrates and organizes the information generated, processes initiated, and results arrived at in each lab, in a manner that contributes to further research and development that will be steered by the young participants themselves. The interactive and collaborative processes entered into by the practitioners, as well as all the resulting products, will form the main body of the project. This will make the development of the methodologies evolved in the labs transparent.

The website, by providing comprehensive documentation of every step undertaken in the labs, will enable the replication of processes and will also serve as a resource for research on the themes and ideas of the project by people elsewhere. The website will also contain all the musical and sound materials produced in the workshops.

The development of the website will be done in phases, in tandem with the process of the constitution of the laboratory idea. The first phase will document the coming together of people in the workshops and a delineation of the different perspectives proposed by the different groups who are joining the process. In this phase, the site's content will offer general information about the project and all the institutions (partnerships) involved in the process. As the workshops start, the online systems designed to enable collaboration between and within different units will become available. This will constitute the second phase. The last phase will contain evaluations of the process, descriptions of the results and the productions created in each session, as well as manuals, tutorials, and FAQs that

are developed in the course of the workshops. All this will be available on the website for open access general public usage.

It is important to emphasize here that the specific methodology for each project that enters the lab will be proposed and realized by the individuals, groups and collectives themselves. This will be done echoing the theories and practices relating to the development of an independent media culture allied to social initiatives and organizations, that they themselves evolve as they engage creatively with new technologies.

The groups involved are very varied, ranging from broad-based independent media organizations to specialized musical producers. A few examples are:

>> Technical Unit: *Metareciclagem* (Metarecycling), an initiative of the *Projeto Metafora* (Project Metaphor)

An initiative to recycle discarded hardware for use in poor communities and localities. Instruction in the technical maintenance and care of recycled computers. All computers will run on free software with operating systems customized to the specific reality of each machine, user and community.

>> Support Unit: Indymedia Brazil (CMI)

Workshops in 'free computing for independent media'. Elaboration of notions of copyleft, and (in collaboration with Projeto Metafora) building a network dedicated to decentralized development for the democratization of technological access, formation of digitally mediated social networks enabled by free software, teaching online mobilization and tools for collaboration.

>> Electronic Media Unit: *Coletivo de Historias Digitais* (Digital Story-telling Collective) and *Museu da Pessoa* (Museum of the Person) and *Base V* (An Experimental Design Collective). An initiative to collect the everyday histories of ordinary people, teaching digital story-telling and rendering these through self-published forms using experimental graphic design.

>> Sound Unit: *Radio Muda FM* (Radio Mute FM)

A free radio collective dedicated to studies and practices in radio and web-radio, *Radio Cipo*, an independent musical community devoted to low-tech music production, and *Interfusion*, a group that promotes events like street parties and free raves on the periphery of São Paulo. Workshops in teaching sound production, editing and mixing, free radio/web-radio programming.

The groups mentioned above comprise the independent pedagogic staff that will prepare the 100 youngsters – as most of them haven't even seen a computer in their lives – to know, understand, create, and express themselves through computers.

### **Autolabs and the Community**

To sum up, local people from peripheral urban communities will create their own Autolabs from the very inception of the project. This means that they will learn how to recycle and

maintain discarded computers, and set up a space for a lab that they identify on their own, in partnership with local community leaders. They will, of course, learn through the workshops to actively use the machines to create their own media, which they will render public through the website. Two such initiatives are already underway, and they will happen in tandem with a week-long event featuring lectures and debates involving Brazilian as well as foreign theoreticians and media activists, as well as a weekend festival – all to be held in one of the poor peripheral districts of São Paulo.

Of course, such a big undertaking demands not only technical and specialized support, but also funding and a viable social network to help in its realization. Thus the autonomous practice of critical pedagogy had to be dovetailed into an existing public policy plan. From its inception, the Autolabs project was linked to Youth Action Centers (Centros de Acao Juvenil, better known as CAJUS).

The CAJUS were developed as independent social projects by an NGO called La Fabricca. La Fabricca is a NGO that raises funding for social projects from other NGOs or institutions. La Fabricca readily embraced the Autolabs project as an innovative process designed to combat the media illiteracy of poorer urban populations. The CAJUS network identified the candidates for participation in for the workshops – all selected from economically disadvantaged families – and also located the spaces where the media labs could be situated. The Autolabs' personnel came into the process once the foundations were prepared, and engaged with it right through the planning, development and execution phases of the project.

Once the project was formatted, and after La Fabricca had put up the initial funding, the Autolabs project was submitted to UNESCO. The project was approved for funding and a plan prepared for the certification of workshop instructors as well as apprentices. This was certainly good news to us, but the most important achievement was being able to prove that autonomous and independent projects in critical pedagogy could also work, be developed and obtain funding from established institutions.

### **Autolabs and Telecentros**

The story does not end here. Initially, each Autolab was conceived as being equipped with twenty computers, a sound production facility (a mini-studio) for radio/musical creation and low bandwidth. But soon, we had some really good news! The São Paulo city government's agency for technology, called *Governo Eletronico* (Electronic Government), also decided to enter the project as a partner.

The Governo Eletronico of São Paulo is known throughout the world for its initiative to combat the 'digital divide' – the very successful experiment of Telecentros (free public internet access centres running on GNU/Linux platforms). The agency, along with Prodam, the organ dedicated to the provision of technological infrastructure, decided to support the Autolabs by providing them with high bandwidth connectivity. Further, it was decided that once the course of workshops ends, the labs will also become Telecentros, and be absorbed (together with infrastructure, personnel and material received or created by the Autolabs).

All this happened because the Autolabs model of autonomous skill-sharing and cre-

ativity attracted the attention of the São Paulo city government as holding out the possibility of evolving a more participatory and active method of practice for Telecentro coordinators, as well as creating the conditions for the emergence of editors, content providers and maintenance technicians from within local communities.

However, even though Autolabs will eventually be absorbed within the much larger Telecentro structure, the core intention of remaining a flexible network of autonomous labs with their self-regulated practices of organization, education and creation remains unchanged.

They will remain embedded within their local community contexts, and responsive to the foundations laid by the independent and tactical media practitioners, even as they evolve into hybridized Telecentros – quite different from the original prototype of what a Telecentro was meant to be. This commitment to autonomy emerges from the practice of the Autolabs, not from any ideological proselytization. What really counts here is the interaction between the free and open access to knowledge that the participants benefit from, and the experiences that the workshop conductors (independent media practitioners) are enriched by. Free Software and hardware recycling being the basis of the project, and since copyleft is the core vision, these projects are able to self-replicate. And since manuals and methodologies (that contain information about 'setting up and getting started' procedures as well as detailed description of everyday activities) are publicly available to anyone who enters the project website, it ensures its own reproduction by any act of replication, by anyone, anywhere.

### **From the Periphery to the Centre – A Tactical Revolution?**

Ultimately, Autolabs are intended to reach not only the periphery but also the very centre. Communication plays a fundamental part in the transmission of the process. Thus, apart from the website and the planned events, two publications – comprising essays, articles, interviews, etc. – are also being planned to present the results to the wider public as well as journalists, intellectuals, media producers, activists, and opinion makers.

Reaching the centre – as opposed to remaining only within the peripheries (the periphery-centre cultural dichotomy is very present in São Paulo) – is part of a tactic to rethink the much-debated 'Digital Divide'. In Brazil, the establishment is accustomed to believe that the antidote to the digital divide is what they call 'Digital Inclusion', a very Brazilian expression, and a concept pervaded by very obscure, paternalistic and demagogic allusions. By merely meaning 'to give digital access to those who don't possess computers', the term 'Digital Inclusion' itself reflects the same ethos of inequality and hierarchy that it apparently sets out to challenge. The policy, conceived in a top-down, one-way fashion by the state, generally lacks a deep comprehension of the everyday life practice, uses and local needs of the very communities that it addresses. It confronts merely the consequences and not the causes of the reality it seeks to intervene in, and usually creates more problems than it can solve. It reinforces the belief that the mere provision of hardware is the only solution and gives more emphasis to consumption than it does to critical/creative production.

Autolabs, on the contrary, are envisaged as critical models of learning how to use media, to produce media, and even recycle the hardware through which these media are

practiced. Although they locate themselves in relation to wider public technology policy, they remain autonomous communitarian media labs – in a way, like an ‘alien’ concept living within the body of a ‘host’ policy. In other words, they implement a form of ‘practical subversion’ while being at the same time funded and supported by big institutions. Like viruses, Autolabs are also self-replicant and may be replicated, since the model and its instructions to do so are freely available on the net. The results are yet to be seen, but the project has just begun and a lot is going on. The virus, then, has been inoculated. Ready for a tactical revolution?

(See “A Network of Castles”, <http://amsterdam.nettime.org/Lists-Archives/nettime-I9705/msg00118.html>)

The page features a minimalist design with several overlapping, thin-lined rectangular frames. The text 'Contesting' is written in a large, black, sans-serif font, while 'CENSORSHIP' is written below it in a smaller, grey, all-caps, sans-serif font. The text is centered within the overlapping frames.

# Contesting CENSORSHIP