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Profile – Between Craft and Technology: the hybrid world of Barrão  
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Author  
Artist

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Barrão

Jacaranda - Nº 2

## **Profile - Between Craft and Technology: the hybrid world of Barrão**

\* Felipe Scovino

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Barrão's artistic career is intimately linked with a kind of opening to the visual arts in Brazil. It may be a vague concept, but I hope that as this essay unfolds, the different layers of meaning of "opening" (amplitude, expansion, etc.) can be picked up and reviewed. Although Barrão did spend some time as a student at Escola de Artes Visuais do Parque Lage (EAV) in the early 1980s, he could be understood as self-taught. This was a time when Brazil's military regime was starting to lose its grip (as seen in 1979, for instance, when a number of artists, intellectuals, and politicians, and almost everyone who had been exiled or taken refuge abroad came home), and protests for direct elections and the end of the dictatorship converged under a prevailing atmosphere that interspersed periods of joy with misgivings about the times to come and calls for political rights. Meanwhile, rock, LSD, and involvement in what we could call a "spirit of freedom" were important to that generation and, I would argue, especially to Barrão's output. We can already detect in his first works some remnants, signs or influences of music, television language, radio, the media, and the personal computers that started to go on sale; basically, the blend of technology, sound, and rapid information that gradually invaded Brazilian households. And this is the first level of the idea of opening: to what extent the artwork and the artist's very function came to adopt the new potentialities for action. And one prime example is *Seis Mãos* [Six Hands] (1983-1991), a collective made up of Barrão, Ricardo Basbaum, and Alexandre Dacosta that engaged in video, live painting, musicals, and performances, and put on a project called "Improvisation with Painting and Music" in public spaces and universities. Collective work has always been a feature of Barrão's work process. Apart from *Seis Mãos*, he is also involved in designing book and LP covers, and is a member of the art collective, Chelpe Ferro.

*Seis Mãos'* first exhibition was held in 1983 at Circo Voador, which illustrates well what I have already mentioned about the cultural scene in Brazil, and especially in Rio de Janeiro. Circo harbored the most varied of cultural manifestations, from Asdrúbal Trouxe o Trombone to emerging rock bands (Barão Vermelho, Paralamas do Sucesso, Titãs, etc.), from performances to exhibitions. Active in this libertarian, irreverent, expansive environment that brought together different fields of art, Barrão, Basbaum, and Dacosta experimented with the new associative possibilities between painting and performance.

*Seis Mãos* was part of a process that saw the maturing of performance in Brazil. Since the 1960s, this artistic language had simultaneously invented its own methods and concepts (as in the work of Hélio Oiticica and Lygia Clark, and what they designated as propositions), and had established contact points with video art, as can be seen in the work of Anna Bella Geiger, Sonia Andrade, Leticia Parente, and Lygia Pape. Barrão, Basbaum, and Dacosta's actions – not to mention those of the latter two on their

own under the name of Dupla Especializada [Specialized Duo], whose actions throughout the 1980s engaged with the discussion of performance – set up interchange with other artists experimenting in performance at that time, like Márcia X. and Alex Hamburger. This mood of irony and humor and standing up to the very conservative prevailing artistic environment was a direct corollary of the limited opportunity for the exhibition of art works and projects, the few exhibition spaces available (institutional or otherwise), and the lack of a critical circuit to debate, critique, and interact in the field of art. These artists experimented with their languages, but they seemed to be operating in a desert, and were at the mercy of the lack of structure, the void, or even accused of not being artists.

A short digression is called for here about an action taken by Márcia X. that illustrates well this inventiveness in performance. In 1986, Academia Performance [Performance Gym] set up shop in the Rio de Janeiro district of Leblon. Like any gym, it was filled with exercise equipment for anybody who wanted to "stay in shape." Márcia X., the brainchild behind this "gym," had the idea of "occupying Academia Performance with different performances, turning the space into a large-scale 'installation,' transmuting the equipment into readymade artworks, exercising the body in unexpected manoeuvres without aesthetic objectives, etc." Basbaum goes on: "The event lasted for just one evening of exercises: the artist, clad in a kind of



3 Little Tereza and Big Tereza, 2006  
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plastic gymslip, did exercises on the different apparatus, did demonstrations, operated a painting machine, lifted dumbbells, etc.” When we came to discuss the increasingly close relationship between art and life, Márcia X. had already beaten us to it in her clear yet tongue-in-cheek way. What is staged and what can be understood as real? What in fact is artistic experience? In this open field of possibilities, the artist set different boundaries for the idea of performance or happening; boundaries that fell somewhere between the real and the made-up, the false and the true. This commitment to take a critical stance in the art environment ties up with the work of *Seis Mãos* if we accept the idea that live painting is also a manifestation that brings to mind street life, the public environment, the happening, and the expansion/opening of artistic environments.

Other artists and art collectives were working in Brazil at the same time as *Seis Mãos*, also refining the experience of performance or public intervention using the most varied of strategies: *3Nós3* (and the solo work of its members, Hudinilson Jr., Rafael França, and Mario Ramiro), Anna Maria Maiolino, Guto Lacz, Iole de Freitas, and Vera Chaves Barcellos.

Also in 1983, Barrão exhibited work in the *Arte na Rua I* [Street Art I] and *Pintura! Pintura! [Painting! Painting!]* exhibitions, both in Rio. The next year he held his first solo show, *Televisões* [Televisions], at *Galeria Contemporânea*, and was part of the joint exhibition at *EAV, Como vai você, geração 80?* [How are you, eighties generation?]. With hindsight, we can see that Barrão's involvement in this exhibition was central for demystifying the idea that it was an exhibition solely of painting, since his work was made up of two televisions placed one opposite the other so that, as the artist himself said, they could “talk;” their screens were partially painted over so that part of them was “free” of paint and the visitors could glimpse the action going on. Yet paradoxically, this work also bears the hallmark of something that has featured in his output throughout his career: even though he was manipulating a three-dimensional technological object, Barrão's thinking process was color-oriented, the most striking and typical characteristic of painters.

It is crucial for us to realize that even at the beginning of his career we can find the groundwork for projects that were done 20 or even 30 years later. In *Avião* [Airplane] (1985), for instance, five refrigerator doors are positioned on a wall to form what looks like a bird's-eye view of an aircraft. At the end of each “wing” is a blender. These are connected by wires to a machine that Barrão uses to switch the blenders on and then “equalize” the sound they make. Indeed, throughout his career he has often made use of sound, giving consistency to his body of work. *Avião* actually predates his joint work with the *Chelipa Ferro* group as of 1995, and therefore sets the tone for his investigations involving sound and the visual arts.

As he draws ties between art and industry, Barrão



clearly makes use of objects from mass culture (televisions, radios, washing machines, refrigerators, ranges, and other mod cons), but unlike Pop artists he is not interested in exploring the dramatic or political undercurrents of this context. He has no desire to make criticisms of consumption or the market; what he wants is to set the boundaries for a very particular field of irreverence, humor, and occasionally irony. There is a clear synchronicity, for instance, between his two food mixers “having sex” in *Sem Título* [Untitled] (1986) and one of Marcos Chaves' works from his *Registros* [Faucets] series (2003), in which two bathroom faucets, one beside the other, take on a sexual identity, as if such a thing were possible. The taller faucet has its mouth turned towards the flat, open surface of the smaller “female” faucet, as if a sexual act were taking place. Above and beyond the two works' allusion to sex, there is also a clear idea, or a key point common to these artists at least in this case, which is the visual poetry they create. It is a wordless poetry, as if the image were written, but then crucially they take away the seriousness or drama of the world to see it in a less devastating or fatalistic way. Humor takes center stage here, razor-sharp, criticizing conventional wisdom, uniformity, and the lack of discernment of rampant consumerism. Yet humor is more than this, and it is this that interests Barrão: he intervenes in the original meaning of the object and grafts on another one unexpectedly, catching us off guard, as a joke. In a way, his use of humor points to a “fun” idea that might interest

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Spilt Nymphs, 2009  
Pottery and Epoxy Resin



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him because it underplays his sense of “responsibility.”

If we wish to draw any links with the broader context, Barrão is closer to the investigations of music videos, the use of digital media and technology as platforms for experimentation to expand the idea of object, than some discourse about the perversion of consumer society and how the artistic object can interpret and criticize this context. This closeness to digital media gives us a clue to his involvement in the field of design and video. Alongside filmmaker Sandra Kogut, he made a series of experimental films that consolidated the language of video art in Brazil, including 7 horas de sono [7 Hours of Sleep] (1986) and A G. Profunda [A.G. Profound] (1987), not to mention the earlier Calendula concreta [Concrete Calendula] (1985), in a partnership between the director and the Seis Mãos group. He designed LP covers for singers and bands like Fausto Fawcett (“Fausto Fawcett e os robôs efêmeros,” 1987, in partnership with Luiz Zerbini), Legião Urbana (“Descobrimento do Brasil,” 1993; “Uma outra estação,” 1997; and “Como é que se diz eu te amo,” 2001, among others, all in partnership with Fernanda Villa-Lobos), Lenine (“O dia em que faremos contato,” 1997), Paralamas do Sucesso (“Hey Na Na,” 1998; “Acústico,” 1999; “Arquivo 2,” 2000; and “Longo caminho,” 2002, again in partnership with Fernanda Villa-Lobos), Herbert Vianna (“Victoria,” 2012), and others. He has also done the graphic design of books by poets, such as Chacal’s *Letra Elétrica* (1994). In the mid-1990s, even with such an incipient art market and such a closed circuit that hampered the circulation and production of contemporary art, with only a handful of galleries dedicated to this area, Barrão’s work earned an award (Brasília Art Award, 1990) and was added to four very important collections of art owned by Gilberto Chateaubriand, João Sattamini, Marcantonio Vilaça, and the Museum of Contemporary Art of the University of São Paulo. Allied to this fact (for although his work was included in these collections, it was not sold in any great number, nor was it granted institutional recognition, which demonstrates the shortcomings of Brazil’s art circuit at that time), Barrão, alongside Luiz Zerbini, Sergio Mekler, André Costa, and later Chico Neves, formed the art group, Chelipa Ferro (although the last two are no longer part of it), and with it gained new opportunities for experimentation, sharing and jointly producing art with other artists.

Hybridism and bodies or machines in mutation are some of the characteristics that permeate Barrão’s work. First, in his investigations of machines using sound, performance, and kinetic installations, and later, in the 2000s, when he started working with pottery, Barrão has probed the nature of excess, strangeness, and flaw not just as topics, but as constitutive processes of these hybrid bodies made from parts. It is a process in which the whole is subordinated by the parts. Their radical differences and strategies aside, it is also worth recalling the words of Louise Bourgeois about her series of wooden sculptures from

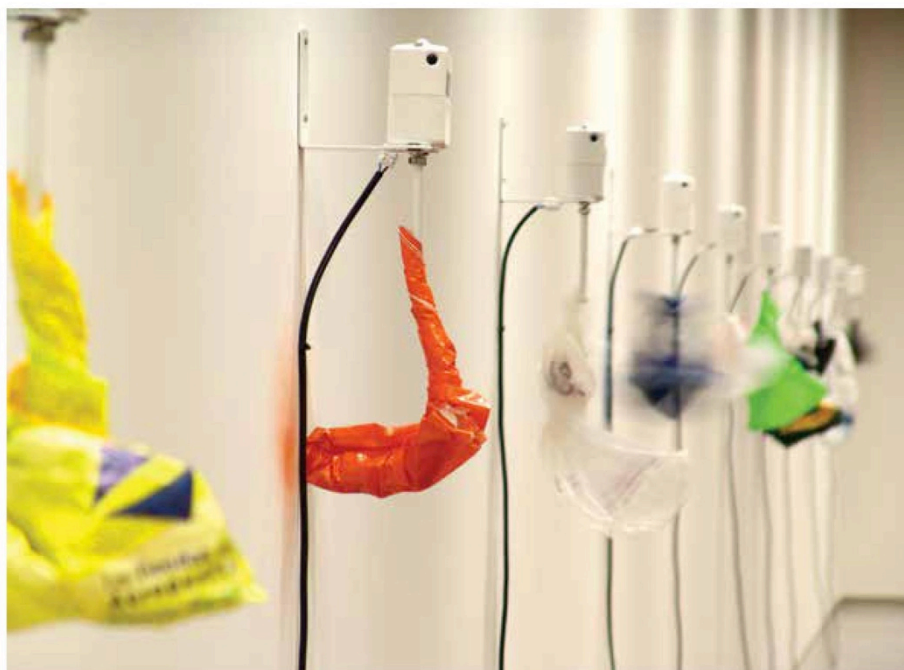


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the 1940s: “this type of work many uses originally separate parts, brought together to highlight their similarities and differences, and also to make them a whole, which is more than the sum of their separate parts. There is nothing impetuous in this working method. Indeed, there is great moderation, care, reflection, and time involved, and the possibility for infinite changes and smaller adjustments.” It is also curious that the second part of the artist’s words has to do with something else linked to Barrão’s meticulous, manual work in the studio: his works can take weeks or months to be ready because some part or the final touch of the piece depends on a piece of pottery yet to be encountered. There is no haste, because although in some cases there is a project underway, it is almost always the very time and action devoted to the task of combining these pieces yet to be allocated that throws up new circumstances, diversions, and paths not previously conceived by the artist.

Dividing, cutting, pasting, combining pieces from different sources and making works from fragments have always been part of this artist’s trajectory. It is interesting that Barrão leaves the adhesive paste, the material he uses to put together his pottery structures, on view. It is this flaw that introduces a new visual element to his works. Everything seems to be held in a precarious equilibrium, as is the case of *Tereção* (2006) and *Barravento* (2010). The latter work consists of an elephant stuck to the wall whose trunk is holding a kind of bag, which is actually a structure made up of parts of a *mano fico*, another elephant’s hoof, a pineapple, and a cabbage. This feeling of

provisional instability interests Barrão. A house of cards ready to topple over at the slightest touch. In a way, the work starts to call for a human state, to be incarnated.

The “scraps” the artist uses – an apropos term because in most of his work he uses second-hand or used products – explore this capacity to reactivate a new order and conceptualization for the object: as an inventor, Barrão manually deconstructs and rearranges new pieces and parts to make hybrid objects, which is indicative of his interest in reconfiguring what is before our eyes but which we see as excessive or look down on; and meanwhile, these same works reveal the intensity of his interest in color. Take *Cavalo* [Horse] (2002), for instance, or *Pato aguado* [Watery Duck], from eight years later. In both these cases we can see that it is not just a matter of randomly sticking together parts or different pottery figurines, but rather there is a care and attention that shows how significant an element color is in his research and how essential it is in this conjugation of form and matter, delicately constructing these monochromes or subtle variations of color made in pieces.

Barrão’s work blurs the boundaries between sculpture and painting. Even though he is a sculptor, or something akin to one, he thinks more in terms of chromatic zones and textures – fields of interest typical of a painter – than in terms of volume, mass and space, the traditional remit of sculpture. We should pause here to investigate two projects from the 1990s that did not leave the drawing board, *Briga dos animais* [Animal Fight] (1992) and *Aspiradores de pó* [Vacuum Cleaners] (1991), which contain indications of



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future directions. In the former, the artist reveals in both writing (“broken pottery souvenirs glued together”) and images the nature of this project, in which a set of different animal ornaments glued together would reproduce what we could call a hybrid animal. Only about eight years later did he actually create his first work using pottery. Meanwhile, the project for Vacuum Cleaners demonstrates how Barrão deals with the concepts of mass and volume and other sculptural issues as he designs a conical semi-structure made solely of the electrical appliances in question. Barrão wrote on the project that “several piled-up vacuum cleaners form a column around 1.70m high. Some are on. Noise.” It is a precursor not only of his work from the 2000s (especially the bricolage and structural and plastic organization of similar elements), but also of the work of Chelipa Ferro, not only because it uses and combines cheap and/or everyday materials, and what Ligia Canongia calls “light-hearted irreverence,” but more specifically because of the investigation of sound. Interestingly, some of his works have their own ancestors, so to speak, or historical references, which only go to make his career even more coherent. Such is the case of *Morretão de 12* [Big Hill of 12] (2014) and a sculpture from the 1980s, when the artist piled up three ranges, placing a TV set inside each oven. The former work is a column made of the cylindrical legs of bathroom sinks, whose flat surfaces highlight the pictorial quality of the sculpture while setting up a play of geometries in a succession of volumes. It is also interesting how Barrão deals with his archive and memory, since although *Copacabana* (1986) is associated with a different time and subject matter, it demonstrates the same sculptural composition and concern with chromatic logic. In this work we can also glimpse the artist’s capacity for foresight, by which I mean the way the association between art and technology becomes such a very significant, mature field of research in the following decade.

Barrão does not keep a collection in the strict sense of the word, meaning he is not a collector of old china or curios merely for the pleasure of doing so, but quite the opposite. He amasses all these objects we could call useless or tawdry (like mugs made to commemorate rural festivals, beer fests, or others of the most varied of representations) as if they were an archive or a store of materials to be used when the time was right, but when this moment comes it is breaking them that interests him. In some cases, he breaks them into dozens of pieces to be used to shape a new body. This habit of archiving and storing is something else he has done since his early years, when rather than pottery, his “collection” was of ranges, refrigerators, television sets, and all manner of electrical appliances.

While Barrão’s place in the history of Brazilian art is quite unique, we might add one other artist to the same category: Guto Lacaz. Back in the 1980s, Barrão and Lacaz were already experimenting in their own different ways in the fledgling circuit for art involving technological

investigations into the possibilities of what we might call machine use in the field of art production. Lacaz’s use of daily objects and exploration of technological possibilities in art is strongly related to the realms of media and consumption. In *Óleo Maria à procura de salada* [Maria Oil Searching for Salad] (1982), a can of oil (of the brand mentioned in the title) equipped with a radar is propelled around a tray by motors; and in *Rádios pescando* [Radios Fishing] (1986), radios of different shapes, sizes, and colors have their antennae positioned horizontally and at the tip of each one hangs a thread, as if they had been turned into fishing rods. Alongside the humor and the occasional situations in which machines take on human forms or behaviors, taking ridiculous, banal or commonplace stances, visual poetry, as was commented just now, has a strong influence on Barrão’s work, and the same could also be said of Guto Lacaz. In both, the form, title and work join forces to create a plastic conjugation where the title is not just something to name the work, but as if it complemented it, an integral part of the poetic creation.

Humor, machinery, and visual poetry, plus the inclusion of sound as a source of research and subject matter for the production of objects, also mingle in the output of Chelipa Ferro. In several works we can see these direct relationships, such as in Barrão’s *A mulher Coca-Cola* [Coca-Cola Woman] (1987) and Chelipa Ferro’s *Boneca* [Doll] (1997). In the earlier work, a doll’s head is glued to the top of a soda bottle and just underneath are her arms, making us see the bottle as her body. In the work by Chelipa Ferro, there is an acrylic box containing a doll and a CD player. Three speakers are positioned at the doll’s breasts and vagina, playing the music on the disc. In both we witness the “collage” of different elements, colors, textures, formats, sizes, and sources, which have everything to do with Barrão’s poetic world. I am not saying that Barrão’s work has a clear, direct influence on Chelipa Ferro’s, but that there is something running through them both simultaneously, so that we can no longer pinpoint who is influencing whom, or whether such influence in fact exists. It is more a case of cross-fertilization, where it is no longer possible to pin down where the action originated from.

There is something subversive about Barrão’s machines and Chelipa Ferro itself. They move alone and create their own autonomy for their actions. Two examples are the group of record players with a miniature elephant placed on each of them, which, when they are turned on, rather than giving us music, give us a dancing animal (*Elefantes de circo* [Circus Elephants], 1986, by Barrão); and *Jungle Jam* (2006), by Chelipa Ferro, where a number of plastic shopping bags fixed to a wall are attached to different motors set in motion by a program that controls which ones are switched on and which are switched off. The bags are “given life” and put on their own kind of concert made by the sound of their hitting against the wall. Not only



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does this put a new angle on kinetics in art, but it is curious how playfulness and toys are so present in Barrão's works, both individual and collective. These two characteristics make the humor or comic nature of the forms made by this artist set up tensions, especially when the work in question involves phallic objects, as in *Batráquios* [Amphibians] (2007). Paulo Herkenhoff's comment about Raul Mourão's *Luladepelúcia* [Stuffedlula] (2006) that "sight and touch are at the service of the aggressive or sexual impulses involved in humor" could arguably equally apply to Barrão's objects. If in Mourão the discussion centered around the stuffed doll, in Barrão it is replaced by plastic, pottery, and machinery. These materials allude to the consumer society: they are easily identifiable and familiar elements and situations that paradoxically set up an "intimate defamiliarization" or inspire a wan smile. These materials or machines that are part of our daily lives are "defunctionalized;" they cease to obey the will or use we intended for them as consumer objects. Their functions as industrial goods, serving some practical and pre-determined utility (to preserve food in the case of a refrigerator; to cook in the case of a stove; to reproduce the sound of an LP in the case of a record player) are annulled. A television is coupled to a washing machine (TV com programação normal [TV with normal programming], 1990), or a stuffed animal is perched on top of a row of toasters (*A paciência do coelho* [The rabbit's patience], 1989), so they are unable to fulfil their functions. Clearly, Duchampian cynicism and irony are visible legacies in his work, but to call Barrão a Neodadaist would be somewhat mistaken. Like an inventor or surgeon, the artist dissects his pieces, and reinvents their places, functions, and "bodies." This is what makes him different than Duchamp or the Neodadaists of the 1960s: his interest is in the machine, in provoking a sense of defamiliarization that simultaneously gives a familiar and light-hearted feeling. As I wrote earlier, this interest also extends to a very particular investigation of the place of manufacturing in sculpture, which has lost some ground in contemporaneity, and Barrão as a nineteenth-century artist using clay or plaster to model and execute his pieces, especially in his works with pottery, but also has to do with issues that indicate a proximity with painting, especially the way he "sculpts" color.

The title of this essay refers to something that has featured throughout Barrão's career, namely the way he manages to combine meticulous craftwork, or this capacity to produce hybrid objects manually – breaking or splitting apart certain materials only to glue them, solder them, or put them back together in another structure – with innovation or technological experiments, which in the case of his first decade of work or jointly with Chelipa Ferro also includes sound studies. It is this inventive capacity to ally materials, devices, origins, stories, and diverse forms that are completely disparate when apart, but like a jigsaw puzzle, are adapted so that

they find their peers and gain new meaning and form.

There is also a curious association between Barrão's work and that of Palatnik. Early on in their careers, and each in their own way and by means of different strategies, they both demonstrated a fascination with the format or language of television. Palatnik's *Aparelhos cinemáticos* [Cinechromatic Apparatus], created as of 1951, are television-shaped, and experiment with colors and lights that in their way translate this fascination with technology. For Barrão, the television is a recurring object – witness his *TV fóssil* [TV Fossil] (1987); *Cabeça de pato girando na tela quebrada da TV Philco movida por um motor de secador de cabelo* [Duck's head spinning on the broken screen of a Philco TV driven by a hairdryer motor] (1990); *Telefunk* (1989), consisting of a television with glasses lenses of different strengths that modify the perception of the image; the two televisions talking to each other in the work exhibited at Parque Lage (*Sem Título* [Untitled], 1984); or *TV Cavalo* [Horse TV] (1988), where a toy simulating a horse's face is fixed to a television set. These works do not use the television just as a support, but actually consider its language with the environment, or the behavior it exerts on consumer society, without imposing any dogmatic discourse about the subject.

So it is that through a variety of techniques, Barrão creates works that indicate his interest in researching and experimenting with media, constructing a fictional world inhabited by differences, but which make it essentially and paradoxically human and concrete. He draws on irreverence, humor, and even visual poetry to convey this invention, so that from this (supposed) fiction we can reinterpret the world in which we live.

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