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Book Review

*Coletivo canal*MOTOBOY (Collective channel*MOTOBOY)*

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Fábio Magnani

In 2004 the Spanish artist Antoni Abad was impressed by the great number of motorcyclists who rode São Paulo streets at high speed between the lines of cars. He asked the taxi driver who they were. The answer—“They are the motoboys, the owners of the streets”—inspired a series of actions that gave voice to the motoboys and allowed them to participate more strongly in the evolution of their own culture.

The Motoboys

Brazil was once called Belindia (Belgium + India) because the minority of its population lived like first-world Belgians and the rest like third-world Indians. This is still true when we talk about motorcycles. The Brazilian market for bigger motorcycles, with displacement greater than 200cc (225,000 annually), is almost the same size as that of Japan and Italy, and greater than that of France, Spain or Germany. These bigger motorcycles are used mainly for leisure and commuting. There are several Brazilian books that recount the experiences of sport and leisure riders travelling on all kind of roads (e.g. *Grãos de Areia*, 1995; *Histórias de Motocicleta*, 2004; and *Manual do Viajante Solitário*, 2010).

On the other hand, the sales of new motorcycles smaller than 200cc (1,550,000 annually) are comparable with numbers in Vietnam, Thailand and Pakistan. These smaller motorcycles are used primarily by couriers and

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for delivery. It is estimated that the São Paulo metropolis alone has more than 200,000 people who use their motorcycles for work. They are called motoboys and, until recently, there was no book telling their history. The book *Coletivo canal*MOTOBOY*, published last year, fills us in on the details.

As it explains, the motoboy phenomenon was born at the end of the 1980s and beginning of the '90s. Before then Brazil had lived 10 years with an almost stagnant economy. Urban growth had more than tripled the size of the cities in 30 years. So the common scenes in the cities were lines of unemployed people and traffic jams. All of a sudden, with redemocratization, a series of changes occurred in Brazil: flexible work contracts were allowed; the market was opened to foreign products; inflation ended; the economy grew and loans were easy to secure. As a direct consequence, now it was necessary to circulate a lot of products and documents. But the traffic had become even more jammed. The natural social solution was for the legion of unemployed people to buy new motorcycles on credit in order to carry the new economy through the city. Brazil was once more moving. But now it was riding a motorcycle.

The new profession brought new ways of working. Now the worker was the owner of his tool, allowing him to change workplaces as he wished. The motorcycle was also a symbol of status and a means of leisure for people who had once been excluded. The motoboy would spend all day in the streets, far away from his bosses, creating his own strategies. Above all, the motoboy would feel the thrill of speed, for better or worse.

The life of the motoboys is not easy. They wake up at dawn to distribute newspapers, spend all day crossing the metropolis exchanging documents and then deliver pizzas until after midnight. Although they are the ones who make the transport of goods possible in the gridlocked traffic of the big cities, they nevertheless are seen as enemies. Unlike the other blue-collar workers who commute hidden from the bourgeois suburbs by bus and subway, the motoboys dare to show themselves in the light of the sun, running free and leaving only exhaust noise behind. The number of motoboys killed in traffic is huge, more than one per day in São Paulo alone, but the money and the distance from the bosses apparently make up for the risks.

The conditions that created the appearance of the motoboys 20 years ago are even stronger now. The traffic in the cities is almost at a standstill. Internet transactions have multiplied the number of products that have to circulate in the streets. In an age of virtual relationships, the motoboys are the real people who cross the cities in order to satisfy the wishes of their new age consumers. In an ironic way, one of the most earthly professions of our time is the proper interface between the cyber world and the physical existence. The motoboy is the way the internet touches humans.

Collective channel*MOTOBOY

The apparently simple technique of the project canal*MOTOBOY was to provide cell phones with integrated cameras to 12 motoboys who rode

through São Paulo. They would register their whole lives in words, photos and videos, and then upload the content in real time to the website megafone.net/saopaulo. Depending on the viewer, the website can be seen as a forum for discussion, a database for further studies, the register of an almost exclusively oral tradition and, above all, a tool of cultural production for the motoboys.

The experience began with Exhibition canal*MOTOBOY in 2007. Before that, Antoni Abad had already created other projects with taxi drivers in Mexico (2004), young gypsies in León and Lleida (2005), sexual workers in Madrid (2005), people with limited mobility in Barcelona (2006) and Nicaraguan migrant workers in Costa Rica (2006). All the projects up to 2010 can be seen on the website megafone.net. The tripod of the 2007 exhibition was Antoni Abad (mentor), Ronaldo Simão da Costa (coordinator) and Eliezer Muniz dos Santos (adjunct curator), a.k.a. Neka. Ronaldo and Eliezer are motoboys themselves. The differences between canal*MOTOBOY and the previous projects are the longevity of the group (collective canal*MOTOBOY) and the absence of an academic organization of the content. In this project, the motoboys themselves put tags to the posts in order to create a “cloud of words” (canal*PALAVRAS) discussing topics pertinent to their group. They talk about accidents, religion, holes in the streets, friends, family, art, work and everything else (canal*DIAaDIA).

Continuing its activities in 2008, the collective organized the First Week of Motoboy Culture. Among the discussions, music and poetry, a series of films was projected. One in particular, *Motoboys: Vida Loca* (2003), was very rich in images. (In it the non-Brazilian can see how the motoboys sail through the traffic jams.) But the true wealth of the documentary is in the range of points of view it offers: the drivers who hate the motoboys, the motoboys who ride carefully to come back to their families and the *cachorros lokos* (crazy dogs) who perform deadly stunts on their way to their deliveries.

The Book

In 2010 Neka published the book *Coletivo canal*MOTOBOY* which recounts the history given above. Like the motoboy project as a whole, the book was written by several hands. Eight authors, if one considers the preface by Antoni Abad, create a braid of sociological, historical and personal accounts of the beginning of the motoboys.

The first part, 60 pages, consists of five somewhat academic texts. In the preface Antoni Abad tells the origins of the 2007 exhibition. Neka writes the introduction, explaining the importance of the motoboys, their inability to take hold of their destiny and the importance of cultural production in order to give them power. A short text signed by the collective tells the history of the group. Then Augusto Astiel Neto writes about the urban conflicts between motoboys and drivers, the almost criminal image created by the media and the motoboys' complicity in playing the roles of outsider, rebel and suicidal maniac. The first part ends with another text by Neka about the First Week of Motoboy Culture in 2008.

The second part of the book, 85 pages, is divided among five motoboys and motogirls who write freely about their lives. The first is Ronaldo, the coordinator of the exhibition. He talks about how he became a motoboy and the organization of the exhibition from the viewpoint of the motoboys. Next follows Andrea, an ex-dancer and now motogirl, who advocates a redefinition of the job: the joy of riding a bike allied with safety. The third text is by Marcelo Veronez, the poet of the motoboys, an ex-motoboy who turned ambulance driver after seeing so many deaths in traffic. Then Fábio Ascempcion tells us about the day he crashed. Fábio describes the first two actions of any fallen motoboy: to move his fingers and toes to test if he is not a paraplegic and to begin to worry about how he is going to feed his family in the following months of healing. Finally, Bruna Bo writes an anecdote about a girl who leaves her little city to work as a pizza delivery motogirl in the big city.

The third part, more than half the book's length, is used by Neka to explain everything that involves the motoboys. That should be almost impossible, but the form chosen make it appears easy. Neka, a boy from the poor Brazilian suburbs, lived it all on the saddle of a motorcycle. Then, at 36, he abandoned the motoboy world in 2002 to study philosophy at one of the most prestigious Brazilian universities. So in this unique way, Neka combines real life experience with theoretical tools to understand what happened. To tell us everything about the motoboys, Neka chooses to tell about his own life.

Neka was born in 1966. In the early '80s he began to work as an office boy, the profession that would give birth to the motoboys. At that time the young office boys crossed the city in buses. Then he was promoted as an intern worker in a bank, where he fought in the most ferocious strikes Brazil experienced during its way out of the military dictatorship. Although his bank job was more prestigious and paid a better salary, Neka craved the liberty he experienced when he was an office boy. So it was without much pain that he began to work as a motoboy in 1988.

In the beginning, the wages were good because there were not a lot of workers and the little bunch of motoboys had a strong work ethic born during the strikes they had experienced in their past jobs. But with time the number of motoboys grew exponentially, replacing the first comers with youngsters without the same culture. In this way the group found itself easily exploited and without the means to resist since constant replacement by new recruits prevented the creation of a healthy work culture.

At the end of the '90s, Neka was disappointed with the new conditions of the job. Low wages and an increasing number of accidents characterized the new scene. So Neka began to act politically in associations and worked for a magazine for motoboys. But soon he realized the positive results were few. The great majority of motoboys did not want to participate in politics. His disillusion grew and in 2002 Neka abandoned his job as motoboy. He spent the following years studying philosophy and living on meager scholarships.

So, in 2007, when he received an invitation to be the adjunct curator of the exhibition, he knew the right way to do it. Instead of traditional labor union politics, what the motoboys needed was a means of participating in the production of their own culture: films, books, theses, poetry, photos, videos, parties, slang, congresses, magazines, websites. They also needed ownership of the business, access to new technologies, participation in the new forms of work organization and to be heard in the making of legislation. The Exposition in 2007, the First Week of Motoboy Culture in 2008, the website megafone.net/saopaulo and the book resulted from that campaign.

The book is focused on specific experiences and its views are partial to the motoboys. If considered solely as an academic book, this would be a major flaw. But *Coletivo canal*MOTOBOY* is not simply an analysis of what happened. The book is a powerful cultural product in itself, giving voice to those who were until now voiceless. In this way, taken as only a piece of a future major study, its contribution is huge.

In watching the motoboys riding the streets one can see crime, violence or disrespect for the laws. But it is also possible to see a new breath of workers' independence, brotherhood, the freedom to make one's own strategies and a love for motorcycles. The eventual vision of this very new profession will be governed by the way it grows. Projects like canal*MOTOBOY are trying to make it grow in a positive direction.

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