

Playing with Wonders: Objects, Role-Playing Games, and the Cultural Legacy of Bispo do Rosário for the City of Rio de Janeiro

Abstract: We know that objects shape thought, as bearers of meaning and as the focal points of memory. Our question as artists and larpwrights was how those objects might affect the act of thinking itself. From this initial thought, we developed the notion of Living Objects — elements created to cause people to have strange new ideas and awaken thoughts beyond those prompted by reason alone — and sought to employ them in the micro role-playing games we presented to people in Rio de Janeiro in order to stimulate such an exploration of fantasy, desire, and daydreaming. The theoretical underpinning of our work relies upon the recovery of wonder discussed by critics like Kareem, Brain, and others. Within this endeavor, we presented Living Objects as fragments that provide a joke (*witz*). Witz is a concept explored by the Jena Romantic philosophers, in which poetic fragments of words influence thought or cause strangeness in normal ways of thinking, and cause derangement in the current logic. With this, they enable new creative paths for imagination.

In doing so, we drew upon the cultural heritage of the city of Rio de Janeiro, especially the art of Bispo do Rosário, who produced a number of distinctive artistic objects during the decades that he was a patient in a psychiatric hospital. And in this work, we focus especially on a piece called “The Presentation Cloak.”

These objects are central elements of micro role-playing games that we created to encourage people to experience the stories linked to the life of Bispo do Rosário and the spaces he imagined about Rio de Janeiro. These games also inspired the participants to create stories from these objects, realizing how the influence of these elements stimulates imagination, belief in wonder, and immersion in the cultural universe created by Bispo do Rosário.

Keywords: cultural heritage, role-playing games, Bispo do Rosário, Rio de Janeiro, Brazil

Rian Rezende

Pontifical Catholic University of Rio de Janeiro
rian.rezende@gmail.com

Denise Portinari

Pontifical Catholic University of Rio de Janeiro
denisep@puc-rio.br

1. INTRODUCTION

“One day I just showed up.”

– Arthur Bispo do Rosário

This work began with an initial reflection: we know that objects reflect thinking, perception, and storytelling; the question is how far can this be pushed so as to spark imagination and open new modes of thought? This thought was intensified from the contact with the artistic work of Arthur Bispo do Rosário, an artist who spent almost all his life as a patient in a psychiatric hospital, and produced more than 800 artworks, and became one of the biggest names in contemporary art in Brazil.

We asked new questions: how can objects influence our knowledge about the culture of a place? How could an object be used to rescue stories and memories linked to a city, and thereby expand the existing cultural heritage of the place? How can storytelling and role-playing connect with these objects, and from this mixture emerge narratives and role-playing games that involve the history of Rio de Janeiro? These questions are guided by Sarah Tindal Kareem’s theories about the marvelous; Robert Silverman and Thomas Hankins’ ideas about instruments of the imagination; and Luciana Hidalgo’s observations about the life of Bispo do Rosário. With the questions and theories established, we carried out experiments with volunteer participants, through the use of the Storytelling Cloak — an object inspired by the work of Bispo and aimed at creating stories. These experiences, and the reflections on them, will be narrated in this paper. First, we will make a presentation of Bispo do Rosário and the theories that served as base.

2. BISPO DO ROSÁRIO AND HIS ART

Arthur Bispo do Rosário was a patient who, between comings and goings, lived for about fifty years in Colônia Juliano Moreira. This hospital for decades was used as a space to house, in addition to those classified as sick, the marginalized and unwanted of society. Diagnosed as schizophrenic, he created more than 800 artworks, using fragments and materials he could obtain at the asylum. According to Luciana Hidalgo:

At first, in the absence of material, Bispo would have unraveled the Colony's own blue uniform to reuse the threads in his embroidery. Undoing his own uniform, deconstructing one of the great symbols of psychiatric power and reusing the raw material to build his parallel universe, his utopia. (Hidalgo 2011)¹

His creative process consisted of resignifying elements and creating objects, which referred to people, places, and memories. Whether they were real or imaginary, Bispo mixed reality and fiction in his pieces, building worlds in the midst of the space that had been restricted: "He began to pick up objects from the hospice and reorder them in a different aesthetic, colorful, playful, subjective" (Hidalgo 2011).

It was this process that inspired us to structure a way of creating stories, fueled by the "poetics of delirium," a concept that is defined by João A. Frayze-Pereira in the preface to Marta Dantas' book about Bispo:

... the word delirium suggests not the strict meaning fixed by psychopathology, but the broader meaning that it receives when in the art field context: deriving from "lira" or "furrow," delirium means moving away from the groove, that is, from the straight path of reason, in this case, of artistic rationality.² (Frayze-Pereira, foreword to Arthur Bispo do Rosário *A Poética do Delírio* 2009)

Based on this poetics that goes beyond reason, and also on the three characteristics that Luciana Hidalgo points out as striking in the Bispo's works — the autobiographical, autofictional and historical elements — we use this triad as a basis for the experiences we carry out. For this, we created a cloak, inspired by one of the most famous pieces by Bispo do Rosário: the Presentation Cloak.

3. WONDER, STRANGENESS, LIVING OBJECTS, FRAGMENTS, AND WITZ

One of the hypotheses on which we base this work is that the objects created by Bispo do Rosário cause wonder and enchantment in people. This process facilitates thinking that goes beyond reason. In this we follow the understanding of Sarah Tindal Kareem who, when studying the Wonder in the fantasy literature of the 18th century, said that this type of sensation involves two forms: "... both wonder at and wonder about objects. These two types of wonder correspond to two distinct meanings of the English verb wonder, denoting surprise and marvel on the one hand and doubtful curiosity on the other" (Kareem 2014, 8).

In this way, the pieces created by Bispo caused enchantment among those who had contact with them, even more so when they left the places in which they were created and began to circulate between

1 Translated by the authors.

2 Translated by the authors.

museums and exhibition spaces. The generation of this kind of enchantment leads to what Charles Lefort defines as the unthinkable, as João Frayze-Pereira reminds us. According to Frayze-Pereira: “Claude Lefort defines the unthinkable of a work as the work that it itself performs with the receiver (reader or spectator) and that, therefore, it depends on the receiver to make itself think, to consecrate itself as a proper work”³ (Frayze-Pereira, foreword to *Arte por um Fio* 2022, 21). In other words, we can understand unthinkable to mean an ineffable property or quality whose significance or meaning can only be realized in an observer’s active engagement with a work.

This unthinkable, and the questions generated by the contact with the cloak, make a conceptual bridge with what we define as living objects: “Living objects are a developing concept, but at this moment, they represent objects created to have their own lives, better yet, to influence and be influenced. They have an inherent narrative, a story to tell, which contains empathy and sympathy” (Rezende, Araújo, and Portinari 2016, 31). Since the objects created by Bispo do Rosário are aimed at representation and communication, and which cause the unthinkable and questioning in those who establish contact with them, we understand them as living objects.

In addition to the questioning made by the cloak itself, the elements that the participants use and encounter when creating the experiences are totally foreign to them, and function as a romantic fragment of a joke (witz). This concept (the witz) emerged with the romantics of Jena; they pointed out that certain poetic fragments, certain words, when launched, worked as sparks, inspired illuminations in thought, and also — which causes estrangement and forces who come into contact with them to think out of the box, which skewer like a hedgehog (Schlegel 1997). The joke (witz) fragments can have their origins from several elements, as Schlegel points out: “A dialogue is a chain or garland of fragments. An exchange of letters is a dialogue on a larger scale, and memoirs constitute a system of fragments” (Schlegel 1971, 170). One of these living objects, which causes this joke (witz), is the clipping of this research, and it occupied decades of work by the author — the Presentation Cloak.

4. THE PRESENTATION CLOAK

The Presentation Cloak was the piece that Bispo do Rosário made through embroidery, names, drawings of objects, fragments of stories, and various historical elements.

Figure 1 and 2: Arthur Bishop of Rosario Presentation Cloak / Fabric, thread, paper and metal. 118.5 x 141.2 cm. Credit: The Bispo do Rosário Museum Contemporary Art Collection / City Hall of Rio de Janeiro. Photo: Rodrigo Lopes.



This work inspired us to develop the Storytelling Cloak, which works by connecting with various biographical, fictional, and historical accounts of the participants, weaving a web of narratives between people, their stories, and their memories in and about the city. We chose the cloak because it represents the work of Bispo, it makes it easier for us to take it to experiences with people, and also because we wanted an object that could be created, re-signified, and thought of in a unique way by each participant.

The cloak was conceptualized by us together with the designer Paula Aragão, responsible for the material development of the object. It has a double-sided format and can be used on either side. One of its faces is brown, and the other is raw cotton, because our idea was to present two possibilities of use for the same piece. We also thought of a structure that would allow people to create elements for the cloak, to reconfigure it, but not permanently, so that with each interaction, new stories could be told through the new objects and created for it: these same elements could be removed, put away, and the cloak would once again become a “blank slate” and be used by someone else. In this way, we thought that the elements to be used in the cloak would be secured with small safety pins, so that new cloaks could be created and dismantled as people used them.

For the use of materials, we were inspired by what Jorge Anthonio e Silva said about the material process created by Bispo:

Through the touch of art, the nature of materials, in their finite reality, expands the meaning of the object beyond its physicality. The latter loses its functional quality. . . to objectify itself with the aura of matter touched by a source of sprouts. (Anthonio e Silva 1998, 87)

Functioning as a source of renewal, the cloak continues to exist, and the narrative fragments created by people form a material repertoire of stories, which are collected according to the use of the Storytelling Cloak, and which can be used, resignified and also recombined for the creation of new autobiographies, autofictions, and historical narratives. Thus, the cloak not only helps in the creation and telling of narratives, but it also collects and incorporates the stories wherever it goes.

Figure 3 and 4: Storytelling Cloak (brown side) and Storytelling Cloak (raw cotton side).



5. EXPERIENCES WITH THE STORYTELLING CLOAK, INSTRUMENT OF IMAGINATION, NARRATIVES, AND ROLE-PLAYING

Participants in the experiments were chosen from a mix of people who had experience creating stories and role-playing, and people who did not. In addition, participants included people who knew Bispo do Rosário and also people who didn't know him.

The experiences with the Storytelling Cloak are basically the following steps: the participants were asked whether or not they knew the work of Bispo do Rosário, and later they were introduced to the Cloak and the elements that could be used in it.

People were also instructed that they could create new elements in addition to using existing ones. After this information, three experiments were carried out, inspired by Luciana Hidalgo's definitions of Bispo do Rosário's work: each participant was asked to create an autobiographical narrative, a fictional one, and finally, a historical one, related to Rio de Janeiro. At the end of each process, a debrief (Atwater 2016) was carried out, as well as a collection of feedback and suggestions for the next activities.

The idea of these experiences was, in addition to testing the creative process with the cloak, rescuing the Bispo's practice and presenting his art to the participants, also to collect stories, characters, places, adventures and memories linked to the city of Rio. The objective was to make the cloak a living object, and an instrument of the imagination (Hankins and Silverman, 1999) so that it could serve as an exploratory tool of knowledge, while at the same time concentrating and connecting, through the material elements created by the participants, stories that are part of the intangible cultural heritage of Rio.

The experiences presented to the participants were also designed to incorporate narrative and role-playing elements. These ideas were based on Markus Montola's theories, pointed out by Rafael Bienia: "Role playing is in line with rules that govern the social interactions between participants, characters, and the story world" (Bienia 2016, 62). Bienia continues: "Montola explains that the structured social process works as a mindset. It allows a player to optionally use role playing as a method of game playing for any game" (Bienia 2016, 62).

Participants are introduced to these elements: characters, places, and the construction of a narrative world. These elements are used, combined, and reconfigured by the participants as ways of creating stories. And the narrative and role-playing are the structural basis and mindset that guide this creative process. The union of these theoretical elements with practice are presented through the experiences carried out and the stories created by the participants.

By showing the elements that compose the world imagined by Bispo do Rosário, and pointing out the rules for those who wish to enter this space using the Storytelling Cloak, we make the connection between world, characters, and rules. The world is in the cloak, and the characters emerge from this object and from the memories, people, and places created. The mindset is created from interactions with the cloak, the material elements used, and the sharing of personal, fictional, and historical stories between people. The narrative and role-playing process takes place through knowledge of the rules. Contact with the world takes place through the cloak, which works as an intersection portal between this space imagined by Bispo and the one created by the participants.

6. CREATED STORIES

"I NEED THESE WORDS — WRITING"

Bispo do Rosário

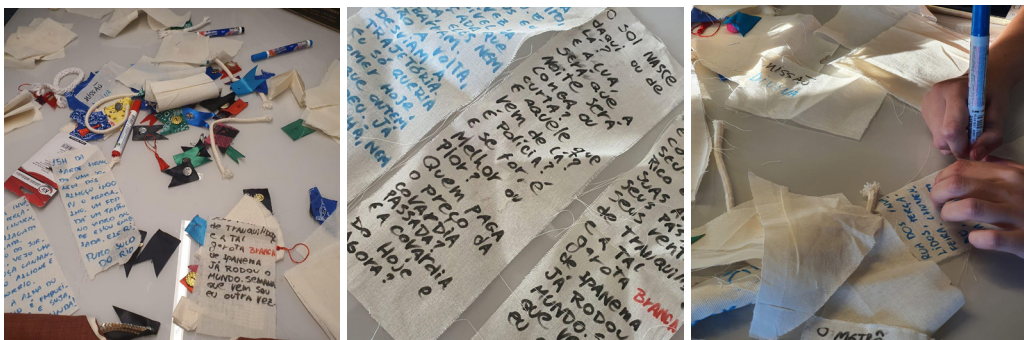
In this part we will tell some of the stories created by the participants, the narrative experiences developed by them, and also how it was to use the cloak during this process.

A participant, from the experience of creating an autofictional narrative using the cloak, told a story that narrated the development of his childhood until the present day, including incorporating the pen used to write on the fabric as one of the props on the cloak, representing the time in which he began to enjoy drawing.

Figure 5 and 6: Participants wearing the Storytelling Cloak.

He later created a micro-roleplaying game, in which three or more people participate in creating a character's life, from beginning to end. In this gameplay, each person uses a fragment of their personal life to narrate a stage in the character's life, and each person continues the story from where the other left off. In the third experience, he related reports and memories of the city, creating a narrative in which Rio de Janeiro is reported from three points of view from different socioeconomic groups, which reflect the enormous social difference that marks the city. After that, the participant described how this story could be turned into an installation:

In this experiment, when reflecting on my view of Rio de Janeiro being always limited to my sociocultural context, I was inspired to try to talk about Rio de Janeiro from a set of different perspectives. From there, I had the idea of a public mobile installation, in which people from each place would write (or represent it using any other graphic expression capable of communicating the same idea) about their perspectives of the place where they live, about their pains and their pleasures. And inside the installation are writings/expressions and from other people who have been elsewhere. Physically it would always expand from a center each place a new installation takes place, in such a way that new participants are always on the fringes. Conceptually, it would be a way of getting to know this city better from the perspective of the people themselves, and not necessarily from the physical space, first decentralizing our perspective and then getting to know others who would possibly be outside our social bubble, despite coexisting, in the same space.

Figures 7, 8, and 9: Elements created and used by participants.

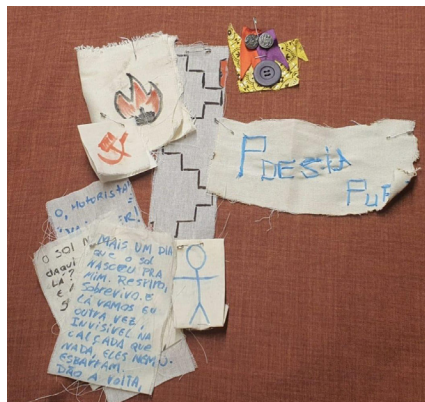
In another experience with the cloak, a participant told a story from a personal aspect. She used the spaces of the cloak as a mapping of feelings — elements that represented aspects of her affection were positioned next to the heart area, and other elements were scattered over other parts of the cloak.

Other participants also used the cloak exploring its spatiality, placing elements not only on the front, but also on the inner side and on the edges, as if exploring an imaginary cartography, and using these resources in the stories and narrative games created.

Another participant, a nurse, who happened to have an internship at Colônia Juliano Moreira, the hospital where Bispo lived, created a series of striking elements of this period for the first experience of autobiographical narrative. The most curious thing was a tile from the hospital, which the participant got from a patient who had lived there for many decades, and she told him to always carry that object with him, so he would never forget it. He made the tile by folding a piece of fabric, added it to the Storytelling Cloak, and narrated that story. This symbolic tile is now part of the materials that can be used on the cloak.

In the second experience the participant created an interactive fiction structure using various story elements and fragments, which had already been created by the other participants. He set up a configuration on the cloak, in which each door of the labyrinth where the character is involved, leads to a narrative fragment created by another participant. And whoever is experiencing the character of this experience has to create a narrative for this element, which works as a kind of fragment of the romantic joke (Brain 2007), as it encourages the participant to create from something that is totally strange and unknown to him.

Figure 10: Elements fixed in the heart area. **Figure 11:** The narrative labyrinth created.



7. DEVELOPMENTS AND REFLECTIONS

There are still other objects created by Bispo do Rosário to be explored, such as the banners, and there are still many stories to be told. But the experiences with the Storytelling Cloak pointed out new possibilities in the use of objects as forms of creation, which explore the spatial use of the body (and objects) in an inventive way, as well as the boundaries between material elements, imagination, memory, and the intangible heritage of a city. They were rescued and materialized in objects: characters, places, and stories of Rio de Janeiro. In this kind of Collective Imaginary Cartography of the City, the space of a place expands beyond its physical borders, whether through narratives or role-playing created by the participants, it incorporates feelings, memories, and creations — real, fictional, or historical — of those who wear the cloak. And through this process, a city's historical and cultural heritage grows, incorporating official, unofficial, and marginal elements. Or as Bispo do Rosário said: "One day I just showed up."

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Rian Rezende, Ph.D., is a professor at the Department of Arts and Design of the Pontifical Catholic University of Rio de Janeiro (PUC-Rio). He is a designer and social scientist. He completed his social science degree from the Federal University of Rio de Janeiro, and has a Master's and doctorate degree in Design from PUC-Rio. He is the founder of 5D Magic. His studies explore innovative methodology and thinking through building experiences, artifacts, and spaces that combine the methods of: games, narrative, imagination and design.

Denise Portinari holds a degree in Psychology from the Pontifical Catholic University of Rio de Janeiro (1984), a Master's in Psychology (Clinical Psychology) from the Pontifical Catholic University of Rio de Janeiro (1988) and a Ph.D. in Psychology (Clinical Psychology) from the Pontifical Catholic University of Rio de Janeiro (1998), with a sandwich held at the New School for Social Research, USA (1996). She is currently an assistant professor in the Graduate Course in Design and in the Graduate Program in Design at the Pontifical Catholic University of Rio de Janeiro.