

## Elsewhere in Contemporary Art: Topologies of Artists' Works, Writings, and Archives

1. *GFP Bunny* was Kac's second transgenic work, created in February 2000 with the birth of the hybrid albino rabbit "Alba" in a laboratory in Jouy-en-Josas, France. Alba contained the GFP (green fluorescent protein) gene of a jellyfish. She is normally white and glows green only when illuminated with a special blue light. Kac originally envisioned *GFP Bunny* as a three-phase project: the first was the creation of a new being through molecular biology; the second its public presentation in a gallery exhibition; and the third was the integration of the animal into the artist's family home in Chicago. However, after the French lab refused to release the rabbit as previously agreed, a worldwide media controversy followed, and Kac employed the media frenzy as material in the new phase of *GFP Bunny*, as exemplified in the photographs, drawings, and other works in his exhibition *Rabbit Remix*.

2. Among many others, see Fabio Cypriano, "O Ateliê faz o artista," and Alfons Hug, "Mundo conceitual reflete crise da pintura," both in *Folha de São Paulo* (Folha Ilustrada), December 22, 2003, E6. *BRAVO!*, September 2004, featured a number of critical articles and historical highlights of all twenty-six biennials beginning in 1951. See also Maria Hirszman, "Bruscky leva seu ateliê a Bienal," *O Estado de São Paulo* (Caderno 2/Especial), September 23, 2004, H-14; Caroline Menezes, "Uma nova genética para a arte: Eduardo Kac usa genes para discutir relação entre ser vivo e tecnologia," *Jornal do Brasil* (Caderno B), September 30, 2004, B4; Giselle Beiguelman, "O queijo-mate cibernético," *Folha de São Paulo* (Caderno Mais!), September 19, 2004, 14-15; and "A Coelho Transgênica," *Veja Rio*, September 22, 2004, 43.

3. Simone Osthoff, "Object Lessons," *World Art*, Spring 1996, 18-23, was my first article about Kac's work. My most recent is "From Mail Art to Telepresence: Communication at a Distance in the Works of Paulo Bruscky and Eduardo Kac," in *At a Distance: Precursors to Art and Activism on the*

On September 2004, when I arrived in Rio de Janeiro on my way to the 26th São Paulo Bienal, images of Eduardo Kac's *GFP Bunny*—his transgenic rabbit created in 2000<sup>1</sup>—were strategically placed throughout the city on three types of advertising displays: illuminated advertising signs mounted above digital clocks and thermometers showed the enigmatic, fluorescent-green bunny; panels at bus

**Simone Osthoff**

stops announced Kac's solo exhibition at Laura Marsiaj Arte Contemporânea in Ipanema; and constantly rotating displays in kiosks presented images of cultural events in the city, among them Kac's *GFP Bunny* and Bebel Gilberto's new CD album cover. A week later, at the São Paulo Bienal, Kac presented a transgenic installation entitled *Move 36*, which along with Paulo Bruscky's apartment/studio/archive—one of the biennial's eight special rooms—was identified by the media as a "must-see" among the works by 135 artists from 62 countries.

Interviews with both artists and images of their installations appeared in the major newspapers and magazines of Rio de Janeiro and São Paulo prior to, during, and after the opening of the exhibition.<sup>2</sup> I have explored aspects of Kac's and Bruscky's multifaceted works elsewhere, and in this article I focus on the issues raised by Bruscky's archive and by Kac's recent books, as well as the unsettled place of this theoretical and archival material within their own work and in art institutions, including the writing of art history and criticism.<sup>3</sup>

A classic mathematical joke states that "a topologist is a person who doesn't know the difference between a coffee cup and a doughnut," as both forms belong to the same class of round objects with a hole in them—topologically called a torus—and can theoretically be transformed into one another. The use in art history of such a broad and uncommon term as topology allows one to go beyond the "vanishing point" and the habit of thinking about art in terms of the "projections" of perspective theory. "Points of view come packed with a full kit of ready-made subjects and objects, planes of representation, and radiating 'cones of vision.'"<sup>4</sup> Topology allows for linking near and far, up with down, in with out, in a paradoxical continuous space most easily understood by the classic example of the Möbius strip. Furthermore, topology underlines a reader-response theory. In a participatory paradigm, the artwork often unfolds in real time, and the viewer-reader must complete the work's meaning. As the boundaries between art's inside and outside become less clear, meaning and authorship become more collective and distributed. In a participatory paradigm, for instance, completeness is no longer possible, desirable, or taken for granted. The artist's role as theoretician and archivist further disrupts boundaries between art production and its documentation, and therefore the traditional hierarchies between artists, critics, and art historians. Bruscky's and Kac's simultaneous practices of art making, archiving, and writing, as they move through various media, sites, institutions, and fields of knowledge, put into practice topological approaches to art.

Since the beginnings of their careers in the 1970s and 1980s respectively, Bruscky (born 1949) and Kac (born 1962) have often performed outside traditional art institutions and practices, forging complex relations between word and image, concept and medium, performance and documentation. Approaching art



**Paulo Bruscky's archives in the Torreão neighborhood, Recife, Brazil (photographs by Léo Caldas, provided by the artist)**

*Internet*, ed. Annmarie Chandler and Norie Neumark (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2005), 260–80.

4. Donald Kunze, "A Topological Approach to the Uses and Conceptions of Space, in Art, Architecture, and Everyday Life," unpublished paper, 2005, available online at <http://art3idea.psu.edu/topology/index.html>.

5. Héctor Olea, "Versions, Inversions, Subversions: The Artist as Theoretician," in *Inverted Utopias: Avant-Garde Art in Latin America*, ed. Mari Carmen Ramírez and Héctor Olea (Houston: Museum of Fine Arts, 2004), 443–52. In this essay Olea underlines the importance of the theoretical production of Latin American avant-garde artists throughout the twentieth century from Mexico to Argentina. Many of these seminal writings and manifestos are translated in the comprehensive catalogue's appendix. The exhibition *Panorama da Arte Brasileira 2001*, curated by three artists—Ricardo Basbaum, Paulo Reis, and Ricardo Resende—showcased Bruscky as an example of the artist-curator. See Ricardo

and life without regard for national borders or the categorical boundaries of traditional media, they have eschewed traditional venues, opting instead to invent new ones. While both artists were born in Brazil, Bruscky has always been based in that country. Kac, however, spent only the first nine years of his career in Brazil (1980–88) and emerged in the subsequent years with the international art scene and the internet as his natural environments. Like other artists who have engaged art with sites and knowledge from elsewhere in the cultural field, such as Robert Smithson and Hélio Oiticica, Bruscky and Kac have continuously drawn elements from art, technology, science, visual poetry, philosophy, and popular culture, promoting the blurring of distinctions among the artist and the theorist, the curator, the archivist, the historian, and the cultural critic.<sup>5</sup>

### **From Archive of Artworks to Archive as Artwork**

Bruscky's studio, located in a two-bedroom apartment in the Torreão neighborhood of Recife, on Brazil's northeast coast, has for eighteen years housed one of the most important collection of Mail Art in the country—fifteen thousand works—along with the artist's own oeuvre, books, newspaper articles, and other works ranging from artists' books and sound poems to films and videos. Packed to the ceiling with papers, files, and all kinds of objects from brushes to kitchen utensils, this impressive studio-archive left Recife for the first time to be exhib-



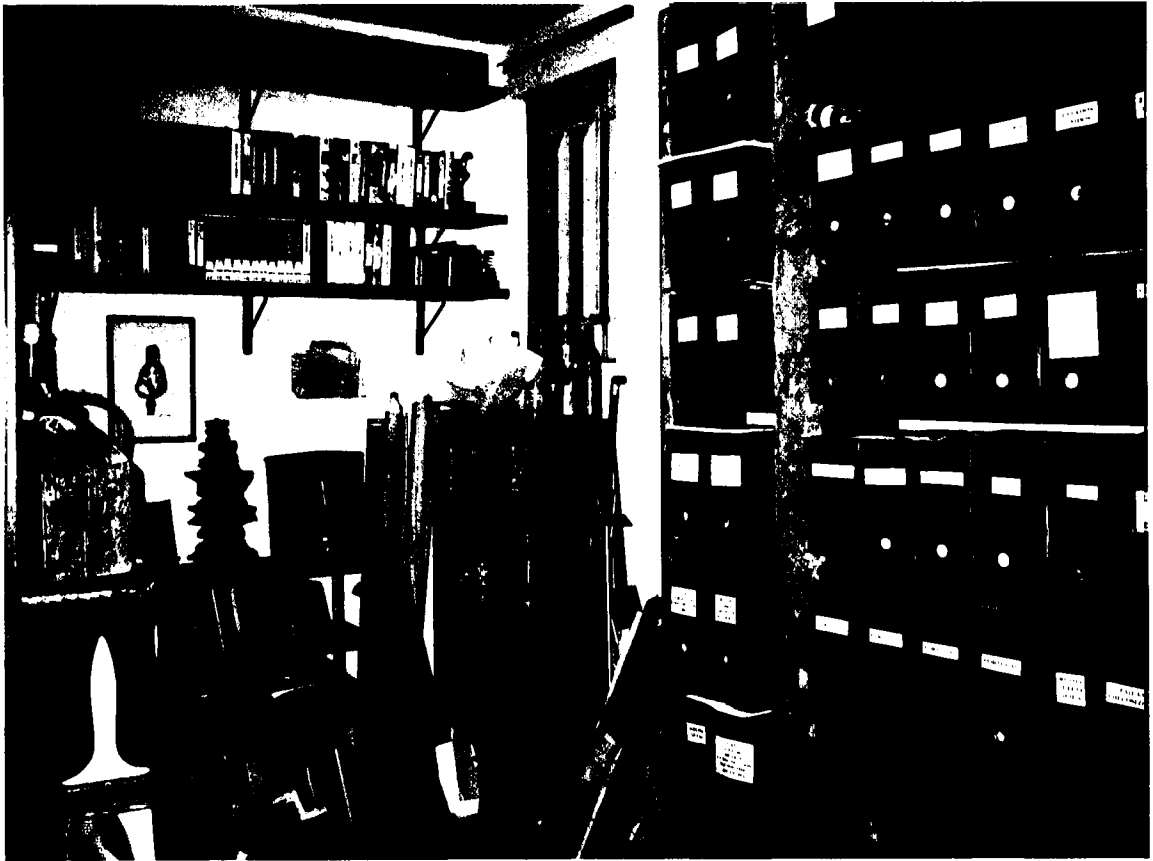
Basbaum, "O Artista Como Curador" [The Artist as Curator], in *Panorama da Arte Brasileira 2001*, (São Paulo: Museu de Arte Moderna de São Paulo, 2001), 35–40.

6. Paulo Bruscky, interview with the author during the installation of the São Paulo Bienal, September 23, 2004 (translation mine). All further quotes from the artist are from this interview.

7. Bruscky was jailed three times, in 1968, 1973, and 1976. After 1976 he received death threats over a period of six months and was constantly followed by the police until he denounced this situation in a solo show at a Recife art gallery, making public the threats he had been, up to that point, undergoing privately. He was never associated with a political party, and his militancy was first and foremost cultural and artistic.

ited as an installation at the 26th São Paulo Bienal (September 26–December 19, 2004). Over the years Bruscky has made the archive available to artists, students writing theses, critics, and journalists. I went there for the first time in May of 2002 to interview Bruscky. Another visitor was Alfons Hug, the curator of the 26th São Paulo Bienal. "When he visited the studio," Bruscky recalled, "he came in, looked at every room without saying a word, came back into the living room, and proposed to exhibit the whole studio exactly as it was in the biennial. I did not expect that reaction, but I agreed, since my art and life have always been inseparable, and the studio-archive is clearly an expression of that. How do we give form to knowledge? In this space I make no difference between my works and everything else here, the archive, my library, my life. I spend more time here than at home."<sup>6</sup>

Bruscky was interested in research from an early age, but in the 1970s his interest acquired an added social and political dimension, a sense of personal responsibility toward history and the preservation of a collective memory. "Each era has its own stories and histories. I was a victim of the dictatorship and had works destroyed by the police. Not only was my personal testimony important to preserve but also that of other artists involved in the Mail Art movement."<sup>7</sup> When Bruscky emerged in the art scene in the late 1960s and early 1970s, censorship and repression were commonly imposed by a military dictatorship responsible for one of Brazil's darkest periods of state political oppression, which began in



**Paulo Bruscky's archives at the 26th São Paulo Bienal, 2004 (photographs by the author)**

8. The Gutai group, founded in Osaka in 1954, included Jiro Yoshihara, Kazuo Shiraga, and Saburo Murakami. With an emphasis on performance, they reinterpreted Abstract Expressionism, then propagating through the media, thus creatively misreading modernism. A similar creative response is found among Neoconcrete artists in Rio de Janeiro in the late 1950s in relation to geometric abstraction. See Yve-Alain Bois's entry for the year 1955 in *Art since 1900*, ed. Hal Foster, Rosalind Krauss, Yve-Alain Bois, and Benjamin H. D. Buchloh (London: Thames and Hudson, 2004), 373.

1968 and extended through the 1970s. (This era witnessed a wave of militarized regimes across Latin America, not just in Brazil, generally supported by the US government.) During this time, the practice of making art—especially experimental art—was a difficult and dangerous proposition. In spite of this climate, artists continued to resist authoritarian structures by pushing the boundaries of experimentation and the limits of public freedom. Bruscky participated in this and became a curator, creating in Recife a hub for the Mail Art movement. He later became a pioneer of fax art and xerox art (the name photocopy art received in Brazil). Not used to relying on public or official institutions for support, he developed instead a strong artists' network: "After all, the documentation of works made in the 1970s is in the hands of the artists." He exchanged letters and works with Gutai and Fluxus artists, among them Saburo Murakami, George Maciunas, and Dick Higgins, and learned about these movements from articles sent to him by the artists along with letters and works.<sup>8</sup> He created a number of international events in Recife such as the *Artdoor* exhibition (on billboards across the city) with the participation of Christo, among other well-known artists.

Bruscky's archive is not simply a seven-thousand-book library and information retrieval system containing extensive correspondence with artists such as Meret Oppenheim. The collections of sound poetry and taped interviews range from Dada artists to an unpublished conversation with Hélio Oiticica. Bruscky



9. Bruscky's first large retrospective exhibition was held at the Observatório Cultural Malakoff, Recife, in 2001. In 2002 Bruscky's videos were screened at the Fundação Joaquim Nabuco, Recife, at the Cinemateca de Curitiba, and at the Agora art center in Rio de Janeiro, accompanied by roundtable discussions. A comprehensive book about Bruscky's multifaceted oeuvre, written by Cristina Freire, curator of the Museu de Arte Contemporânea de São Paulo, is forthcoming. 10. Bruscky's work had been showcased in the São Paulo Bienal twice before, in 1981 and in 1989, when he was also invited to exhibit *heliografias* (works created with the technique commonly employed to print architectural blueprints).

has given the archive's large collection of comic books to his son, who is working with the medium. "Humor, puns, and word play are always present in my work. Humor is antityranny, antiauthoritarian," comments Bruscky, who has always taken the sliding meaning of signifiers seriously and, as part of the process, in bohemian fashion, hosts in his studio every Saturday a group of artists who join him in conversation and the drinking of a good *cachaça*.

An important cultural activist working outside the hegemony of Brazil's major cultural centers (Rio de Janeiro and São Paulo), Bruscky, who has never sold a work in his life, is experiencing a new wave of recognition from major museums and cultural institutions in Brazil.<sup>9</sup> Despite all the exposure and attention his work is receiving, being part of the biennial was not new for him, nor did it excite him nearly as much as the precious rare books and catalogues he found on incursions into used-book stores during his daily walks between the hotel and the Ibirapuera park, where the biennial pavilion is located.<sup>10</sup> A few days prior to the opening of the biennial, I asked Bruscky what might happen to the contents of the archive when it is exhibited primarily for its formal, personal, and idiosyncratic qualities, as a type of Merzbau. He didn't seem concerned with either the possible loss of content or the meanings the archive might acquire in this new context. He told me that, for one thing, the biennial docents were carefully instructed by the art historian who knows his work best—Cristina Freire—to address the content of the work as well as his working process. Bruscky's long

experience with institutions, curators, and critics, as well as with their limitations, led him to work with the certainty that time will tell.

The question of the institutional location of the archive—physical, ontological, and historical—has become increasingly relevant to the writing of contemporary art history. As a powerful mediator between memory and writing, the archive constitutes a fertile territory for historical and theoretical scrutiny, especially for those engaged in writing the history of post-1960s art. In *Archive Fever*, Jacques Derrida, focusing on Sigmund Freud's archive, raised questions that foreground what Derrida sees as the inherent instability of representational processes. Probing which data belonged inside the archive and which outside, Derrida asked, for instance, which letters and documents belonged to Freud's personal family history and which to his professional life and to the history of psychology. The deconstruction of the clear boundaries between personal and public spheres performed by Derrida in relation to Freud's archives slowly undermined common assumptions about origins, genealogy, authority, power, legality, and legitimacy. *Archive Fever* was prompted, as was my interest in Bruscky's archives, by the process of transforming the subject's house into a museum, and thus by "the passage from one institution into another."<sup>11</sup>

Besides Derrida's important examination of the archive, two other books have broadened issues of history, memory, and representation, offering useful alternative methodologies and approaches to archives. The first is Ann Reynolds's original approach to Robert Smithson's archive, which used a morphological methodology not very common among historians, but employed by Smithson himself as his working method. These morphological connections of eclectic material, such as images and written texts, diverse authors, disciplines, and concepts from popular and erudite culture, are "categories of thought and images that remain invisible to established hierarchies of interpretation."<sup>12</sup> The second book, written from the point of view of performance studies and focusing on inter-American cultural relations, is Diana Taylor's *The Archive and the Repertoire*, in which Taylor examines the hegemonic power of text-based archival sources over performative, oral, and other ephemeral forms of knowledge.<sup>13</sup>

The experimental, concept-based, and often ephemeral aspects of contemporary art, which have only increased since the 1960s, producing fluid lines between work and documentation, certainly benefit from the issues raised by all three books, which pose relevant methodological challenges to more positivist approaches to documentation in art history and criticism. Bruscky's and Kac's works, writings, and archives put into play logical topologies that often escape the chronological and medium-based analytical methods of art history and criticism.

### **The Artist as Theorist: Art Writing as Topology**

In September 2004, while Laura Marsiaj Arte Contemporânea in Rio de Janeiro showcased Eduardo Kac's solo show, his work was simultaneously exhibited at the Gwangju Biennale and the São Paulo Bienal, as well as in group shows in Chicago, Lima, and other cities. On top of this busy exhibition schedule, Kac was also finishing the production of two books, each collecting writings from a different period of his career. The first, *Luz & Letra* (thus far available in Portuguese only), is an anthology of his articles and essays written between 1981 and 1988

11. Jacques Derrida, *Archive Fever: A Freudian Impression* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996), 3.

12. Ann Reynolds, *Robert Smithson: Learning from New Jersey and Elsewhere* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2003), xv.

13. Diana Taylor, *The Archive and the Repertoire* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2003).

and published in the most important newspapers in Rio de Janeiro and São Paulo, along with an appendix of projects and sketches of the period.<sup>14</sup> Examining the broad field of visual culture in the 1980s, these articles have had a lasting impact. In their visionary originality, they were early critical probes at the intersection of art, literature, technology, and popular culture. Written in an elegant, direct, and informative style, from a perspective both Brazilian and international, Kac's essays challenged established artistic values and venues, while opposing the label of the 1980s generation in Brazil as primarily a "return to painting" movement. In the preface to *Luz & Letra*, the art critic Paulo Herkenhoff, a former curator at the Museum of Modern Art in New York, stresses the importance of Kac as theoretician: "This book is a document of Brazil, which retrieves the decade of the 1980s—a period thought to have been lived under the tyranny of painting—as a moment of gestation of new ideas. Eduardo Kac is a precursor among precursors of media art theory [...] his action was always characterized by an intention to alter a system of hierarchies through the rescuing of artists and experiences."<sup>15</sup>

Kac's second book, with selected essays from 1992 to 2002, was published in 2005 by University of Michigan Press and titled *Telepresence and Bio Art: Networking Humans, Rabbits, and Robots*. In the foreword, James Elkins points out:

This is an unusual book, because Kac has participated in the movements he discusses. He is an artist and also, at times, a historian. The combination is rare. A comparison might be made to Robert Motherwell, except that as a historian he was more concerned with surrealism than the art of his own generation: he separated documentation from creation in a way that Kac does not. Eugène Fromentin might be another example, and among near-contemporaries there are Meyer Schapiro, Leo Steinberg, and David Summers. It's a short list. The closest comparisons may be to László Moholy-Nagy; or to Paul Signac, who wrote a history of French painting up to and including his own generation; or—though he's not much of a historian—Frank Stella.<sup>16</sup>

Elkins is right in positioning Kac as a historian "at times," because most of the time, the artist is a theoretician. In his writings, the historical research is at the service of his theoretical argumentation.<sup>17</sup> Kac's book articulates several new concepts he has introduced, such as *telepresence art*, *telempathy*, and *performative ethics*. Kac's work and essays about a new art based on the networking of humans, plants, animals, and machines not only examine current issues in science, technology, and culture, but also create dialogue with other artists and radical thinkers, often across time and space, who like him seek or have sought art's meaning in nontraditional places and fields of knowledge.

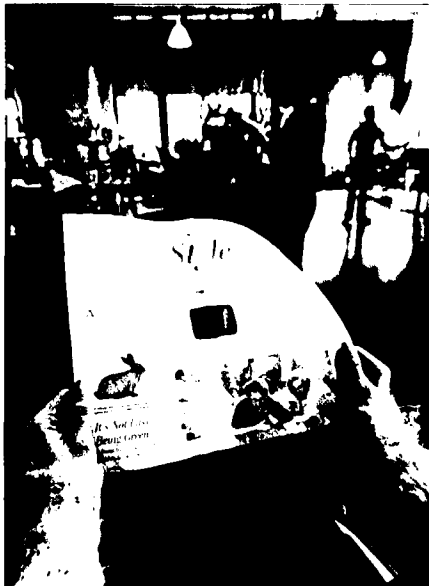
The meaning Kac gives the word *aesthetics*, for instance, can be understood as both a topos (a theme) and also as a topology (either physical or logical). In the case of information networks, processes of communication can differ depending upon whether one is referring to a physical topology (e.g., the shape of a local area network) or a logical topology (e.g., the protocols that allow data flow within the networks). Kac's topological aesthetics emphasizes communication processes in real-time events and, since his employment of biotechnology as a medium, in the creation and social integration of new life forms. Didier Ottinger, the chief curator of the Centre Georges Pompidou, Musée national

14. Eduardo Kac, *Luz & Letra: Ensaios de Arte, Literatura e Comunicação* [Light & Letter: Essays in Art, Literature, and Communication] (Rio de Janeiro: Contra Capa, 2004).

15. Paulo Herkenhoff, preface to *Luz & Letra*, 18 (translation mine).

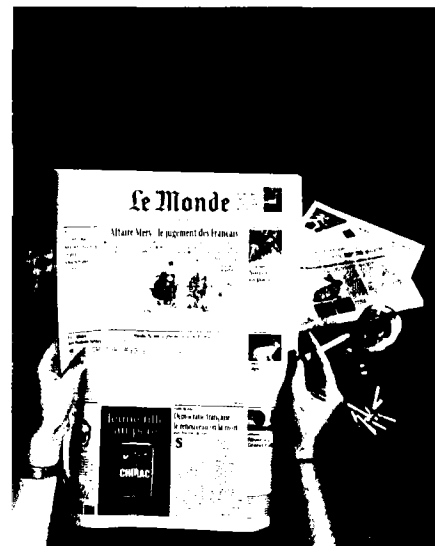
16. James Elkins, foreword to *Telepresence and Bio Art: Networking Humans, Rabbits, and Robots*, by Eduardo Kac (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2005), vi.

17. Among Kac's contributions as a historian is the *Leonardo* editorial project titled "A Radical Intervention: Brazilian Electronic Art." For the most recent article in this ongoing series, Kac invited scholar Rui Moreira Leite to write a paper about what Kac saw as the artist Flávio de Carvalho's pioneering use of the media. In 1956 the São Paulo artist and provocateur de Carvalho introduced his summer garment *New Look* in now-legendary *Experiences* for the press and on the streets of São Paulo. In 1957 he introduced it on TV. Carvalho's garment consisted of a short, pleated skirt, a blouse with puffy short sleeves, a hat made of semitransparent fabric, and fishnet tights. See Rui Moreira Leite, "Flávio de Carvalho: Media Artist Avant la Lettre," *Leonardo* 37, no. 2 (April 2004): 150–57, available online at <http://mitpress2.mit.edu/e-journals/Leonardo/isast/spec.projects/brazil.html>. Further editorial projects by Kac are: *Signs of Life: Bio Art and Beyond* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2006); and *Media Poetry: Poetic Innovation and New Technologies* (Bristol: Intellect, 2006), first published as a special issue of the journal *Visible Language* 30, no. 2 (1996).



Eduardo Kac, *Free Albal* 2001, series of six color photographs mounted on aluminum with Plexiglas, each approx. 36 in. (91.4 cm) in width, edition of 5, shown in the exhibition *Rabbit Remix* at Laura Marsiaj Arte Contemporânea, Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, 2004 (artwork © Eduardo Kac).

Media coverage of Kac's *GFP Bunny* included articles in the *Washington Post*, *Folha de São Paulo*, *Le Monde*, *Ann Arbor News*, *Boston Globe*, and *Die Woche*. Kac incorporated the coverage in *Free Albal*.



d'art moderne, Paris, compared the impact of Kac's redefinition of aesthetics to that of Marcel Duchamp's:

Eduardo Kac's *GFP Bunny* set off shockwaves in the field of art comparable to those caused by Marcel Duchamp's urinal. Following the example of its sanitary forerunner, the rabbit's "prestige" grows in proportion to its invisibility. The animal, "created" by a French laboratory (the INRA at Jouy-en-Josas), was never exhibited in the public space for which it was conceived. On the other hand, its photograph did make the front page of the world's most important newspapers. Like the urinal, the fluorescent rabbit raises questions that prompt us to redefine our own ideas and aesthetic criteria.<sup>18</sup>

There is indeed an uncanny juxtaposition between the publications of Kac's writings from the 1980s and his 2004 solo exhibition *Rabbit Remix*.<sup>19</sup> The show orchestrated the presence of *GFP Bunny* in the global media and a further intervention in the public space of Rio de Janeiro—the scene where the artist first started reclaiming public space in the early 1980s, while contributing to the erosion of censorship and the return of a democratic regime. The drawings and large photographs the artist exhibited in Rio de Janeiro continued the discussion of bio art in relation to science, ethics, religion, and family, issues Kac addresses in many forms beyond the gallery, such as articles and interviews, lectures and debates, and public interventions. Kac's remixing of the *GFP Bunny* icon, which includes the reappropriation of the media response to his work, both verbal and visual, employs the media as a medium.

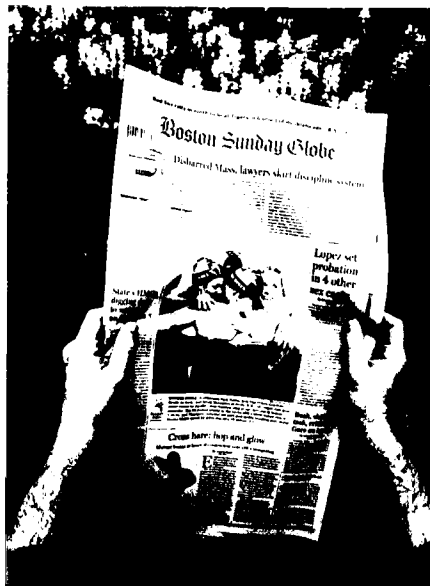
### A Topological Approach to Art and the Crisis of Criticism

In the course of the several decades that their trajectories span, Bruscky and Kac have forged through their practices the very space in which their work takes place. Unlike contemporaries who have relied on established media (such as

18. Didier Ottinger, "Eduardo Kac in Wonderland," in *Rabbit Remix*, exh. cat. (Rio de Janeiro: Laura Marsiaj Arte Contemporânea, 2004), repr. in *Eduardo Kac: Move 36*, ed. Elena Giulia Rossi (Paris: Filigranes Editions, 2005), 66–68.

19. In *Rabbit Remix* Kac exhibited a series of photographs, drawings, a flag, a web piece, and a limited-edition artist's book entitled *It's Not Easy Being Green!*





painting) and whose work is embraced and circulated freely in acknowledged institutions (such as museums), Bruscky and Kac have often worked with new technologies and remote communication, short-circuiting the effects of institutional and market validation as well as physical distance in the circulation of their works. In their case the communicative act itself often constitutes the work. Thus, it is clear that the artists have taken a position that is critical of the institutional and discursive limitations that have not been able to incorporate and engage with their practices. This critique, which is often implicit in the material manifestation of their works, at times becomes explicit, as in the case of Bruscky's exhibition of his archive and Kac's books—both of which I have sought to highlight here.

Whether Bruscky and Kac perform criticism as an art practice or art as a critical practice, their multiple roles as artists, researchers, archivists, and theoreticians offer new topological approaches to the historicization of art since the 1960s. If there is a common agreement in current discussions of art criticism, it is the recognition of a general crisis, as foregrounded by the 2002 *October* group roundtable "The Present Conditions of Art Criticism," by James Elkins's 2003 booklet *What Happened to Art Criticism?* by Raphael Rubinstein's 2003 article "A Quiet Crisis," and by Nancy Princenthal's 2006 article "Art Criticism, Bound to Fail."<sup>20</sup> Other critics have also called attention to the apparent paradox between the vibrant expansion of the global art market and the simultaneous demise of criticism in recent decades, pointing to the increased inability of contemporary critics to make value judgments, as art criticism becomes ever more informative and promotional than critical.<sup>21</sup> The relationships among art history, art criticism, critical theory, and literary criticism are more fluid than ever.

Judgment, in the sense of keeping up standards of "quality," however important in the past, no longer seems to be the most important function of the art critic. Whether critics write in a more subjective and impressionistic literary style or base their work on more rigorous theories such as semiotics, psychoanalysis,

20. Rosalind Krauss, Benjamin Buchloh, George Baker, Andrea Fraser, David Joselit, Robert Storr, Hal Foster, John Miller, James Meyer, and Helen Molesworth, "Roundtable: The Present Conditions of Art Criticism," *October* 100 (Spring 2002): 200–28; James Elkins, *What Happened to Art Criticism?* (Chicago: Prickly Paradigm Press, 2003); Raphael Rubinstein, "A Quiet Crisis," *Art in America*, March 2003, 39–45; Nancy Princenthal, "Art Criticism, Bound to Fail," *Art in America*, January 2006, 43–47.

21. Barry Gewen, "State of the Art," *New York Times*, December 11, 2005. Gewen underlined the bleak state of contemporary art criticism by mentioning critics from Clement Greenberg and Michael Fried to Harold Rosenberg, Hilton Kramer, and, more recently, Donald Kuspit, who have lamented the gratuitous excesses and lack of restraint in art from the second half of the twentieth century. Even when enlisting more sympathetic critics of contemporary art, such as James Elkins, Arthur Danto, and the *October* group, Gewen observed they have not offered very positive answers to the question "Is the avant-garde running out of steam?"

Paulo Bruscky, Mail Art envelope with an X-ray of the artist's face, 1976, approx. 5 x 6 1/2 in. (12.5 x 17.5 cm) (artwork © Paulo Bruscky)



and Marxism, art's meaning and interpretation are increasingly an ongoing, largely "collaborative" process negotiated among multiple readers-viewers-participants and institutions, including those in the cultural industry. The role of the mass media and the art market in imposing the cultural value of an artist is paramount but seldom if ever analyzed or critiqued.

It is not uncommon for critics to collaborate with avant-garde projects; examples include Clement Greenberg in relation to Abstract Expressionism, Ferreira Gullar and Mario Pedrosa within the Neoconcrete movement, Lucy Lippard in relation to Conceptual art and the women's art movement, Rosalind Krauss in relation to Minimalism and Postminimalism, Guy Brett in relation to the kinetic and participatory works of artists such as Hélio Oiticica and Lygia Clark, and Frank Popper in relation to new media art. For Krauss, an important function of criticism is "scanning the horizon for some new blip appearing on it."<sup>22</sup> Her statement can be understood in relation to the present and future of art, but also in relation to the past, which is always written from the present, as previously overlooked contributions are found and old legacies interpreted anew.

In these discussions, however, there is rarely a reference to the vibrant expansion and the formal or intellectual innovations of new media art, perhaps because the new media embrace a temporality and spatiality produced by the constant acceleration, overload, and complication of our natural and cultural environments. This development may be perceived to be at odds with the traditional focus of the humanities—but certainly not with the routine experiences of using cell phones, iPods, DVDs, ATM machines, e-mail, web searching, and online commerce, to name a few common uses of contemporary technology that may be combined with watching TV and listening to the radio. Is this growing complexity good? What does "good" mean? Understanding the heterogeneous values and truths of our denser information environment and making sense of the paradoxical, unforeseen relations among these elements are in large part what art and critical theory do best, especially when working together.

22. Krauss, *October* 100, 216.

Elsewhere in contemporary art, less-examined histories also suggest that art since the 1960s has continuously thrived in direct dialogues with criticism.

As with other artists who archive and write about the movements they participate in, the first impetus for Bruscky and Kac to document, to identify predecessors, and to cultivate a network of collaborators might have been prompted by the need to create a critical space for their work to develop.<sup>23</sup> As Bruscky's studio-archive has exemplified—changing its function from an archive of artworks to the archive as artwork—art and documentation may easily change places in his practice according to the institutional context in which they appear. And as we saw with Kac's *Rabbit Remix*, the artist has transformed the media and public reception of his *GFP Bunny* into the material for a new series of artworks.

The subtitle of Kac's 2005 book—*Networking Humans, Rabbits, and Robots*—highlights a radical and hybrid connectivity in which, I argue, his books are themselves a constitutive element, as network hub.<sup>24</sup> Kac has often approached art institutions less as containers of culture and more as interface—as one more node of his networked ecologies. Such was the case of his telepresence installation *Rara Avis* (1996), in which the artist brought the internet into the Nexus Contemporary Art Center for the first time, to connect local and remote participants in the experience of a large aviary from the point of view of a telerobotic macaw.<sup>25</sup> Likewise, Kac's writings connect hybrid aesthetic elements such as language, light, and life, but can at the same time be seen at the crossroads of multiple institutional contexts such as the studio, the internet, the museum, the art market, scholarly research, and the mass media.

The juxtaposition of the publication of Kac's *Luz & Letra* with his exhibition *Rabbit Remix* reveals a direct relationship from the beginning of his career among his work, his critical writings, the gallery space, and the space of the mass media. In September of 2004 these multiple arenas were occupied simultaneously by the glowing rabbit icon, which also appeared throughout the city of Rio, continuing its four-year rapid propagation along with a controversy of unforeseen scale and speed.

Bruscky's archives and Kac's new books are more than collections of objects or texts to be consulted at a later time by an isolated researcher. The active and public diffusion of these artists' archives and books plays a direct role in the kind of art these artists make and the space in which the works circulate, as the works engage multiple institutional spaces topologically. The unique relations created between Bruscky's archives and Kac's writings and their respective artistic productions—which for the most part have privileged real-time events, indexical processes, live interventions, and (in Kac's case) life creations—are examples of the complex issues involved in writing the history of contemporary art, in which the boundaries between work, writing, documentation, and reception are often fluid and include the multiple institutional spaces the artists help transform.<sup>26</sup>

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23. Other examples in the United States, besides Kac's *Telepresence & Bio Art*, include Donald Judd, *Complete Writings 1959–1975* (Press of the Nova Scotia College of Art and Design, 2005); Andrea Fraser, *Museum Highlights: The Writings of Andrea Fraser* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2005); Martha Rosler, *Decoys and Disruptions: Selected Writings, 1975–2001* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2004); Robert Smithson, *The Collected Writings*, ed. Jack Flam (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996); and Joseph Kosuth, *Art after Philosophy and After: Collected Writings, 1996–1990* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1991).

24. Simone Osthoff, "Eduardo Kac: Networks as Medium and Trope," in *Ecosee*, ed. Sid Dobrin and Sean Morey (State University of New York Press, forthcoming).

25. *Rara Avis* premiered as part of the exhibition *Out of Bounds: New Work by Eight Southeast Artists*, curated by Annette Carozzi and Julia Fenton at Atlanta's Nexus Contemporary Art Center, June 28–August 24, 1996. In 1997, *Rara Avis* traveled to three other venues: the Jack Blanton Museum of Art, Austin, Texas; the Centro Cultural de Belém, Lisbon, Portugal; and the Casa de Cultura Mario Quintana, Porto Alegre, Brazil, as part of the Bial de Artes Visuais do Mercosul.

26. See Cristina Freire, *Poéticas do Processo* (São Paulo: Iluminuras, 1999), in which the Brazilian curator and art historian explores the uncertain place, both physically and conceptually, of the 1970s artistic production within the archives of the Museu de Arte Contemporânea of São Paulo, Brazil, which contains works by both Bruscky and Kac, among others.