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Raphael Soifer is a Donors' Fellow studying the relationship between the arts and social change in communities throughout Brazil.

Performing Politics in São Paulo

By Raphael Soifer

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É Lula lá!
É Serra aqui!
E nossa verba vai pro FMI!

It's Lula there!
It's Serra here!
And our funding goes to the IMF!

Let me admit from the outset that protest chants never quite work on paper, and that they're almost certain to fail in translation. You really have to be there to hear them, especially if they're bellowed from *trios elétricos* — giant trucks mounted with staggeringly powerful speakers — while simultaneously echoed by a couple thousand university students and workers, all accompanied by a *bateria* of dozens of samba percussionists. With so much acoustic force, a protest chant becomes hard *not* to hear. I caught the above verse from a few blocks north as I explored the downtown on my first day in São Paulo, and quickly made my way back through the drizzle to Avenida Paulista, the city's main commercial promenade, to see the commotion up close.

In this case, it also helps to know that José Serra is the newly-elected governor of São Paulo state, and a member of the slightly right-of-center PSDB (Social Democratic Party of Brazil), and that *"Lula lá"* ("Lula there") was one of the theme songs of Luis Inácio Lula da Silva's wildly successful presidential campaign in 2002 with the PT (Workers' Party). I knew that much, but I wasn't sure what both men were doing in the same chant. Serra, after all, had been Lula's most prominent opponent in 2002, and although Lula has long since fallen out of favor with many traditional leftists and much of Brazil's poor majority, I hadn't expected to hear the "people's president" grouped together so starkly with the strictly establishment PSDB. I looked around for an explanation, but the *bateria* was too busy drumming, and the group ahead of them — about 10 dancing college students dressed as cows, using jigsaws to cut through a large square of wood labeled "Autonomy," and offering tiny paper diplomas to passers-by — would only moo.

I got slightly more detailed answers as the *manifestação* — equal parts parade and political rally — continued toward the State Legislature through an increasingly torrential downpour. A hoarse, fiery-eyed graduate student with an impressively bushy blond beard told me that Lula had betrayed his roots, and was working to pass legislation cutting university funds and financial support available to university students. Other marchers told me that Serra was trampling on university autonomy, and was on a course to destroy public education in São Paulo. Students at the Universidade de São Paulo (USP) were occupying the *reitoria*, the main administrative building, in protest, and Serra was threatening to authorize riot police to clear out the building the next day. The *manifestação*, a middle-aged woman explained, was going to deliver its message to the legislature. There, Serra would have to let the people speak, dancing cows and all.

The protest organizers on the *trios elétricos* pontificated loudly, one over the

About the Author

Raphi Soifer

Raphi Soifer began acting at age 7, just as Michael Dukakis' devastating loss awakened him to the world of politics. Perhaps as a result, he has long been interested in the overlap between politics and performance.

Raphi graduated from Yale University in 2004, where he served as artistic director of the Control Group, Yale's only experimental performance troupe. He studied Portuguese, and with Yale travel grants, had the opportunity to fall in love with Brazil.

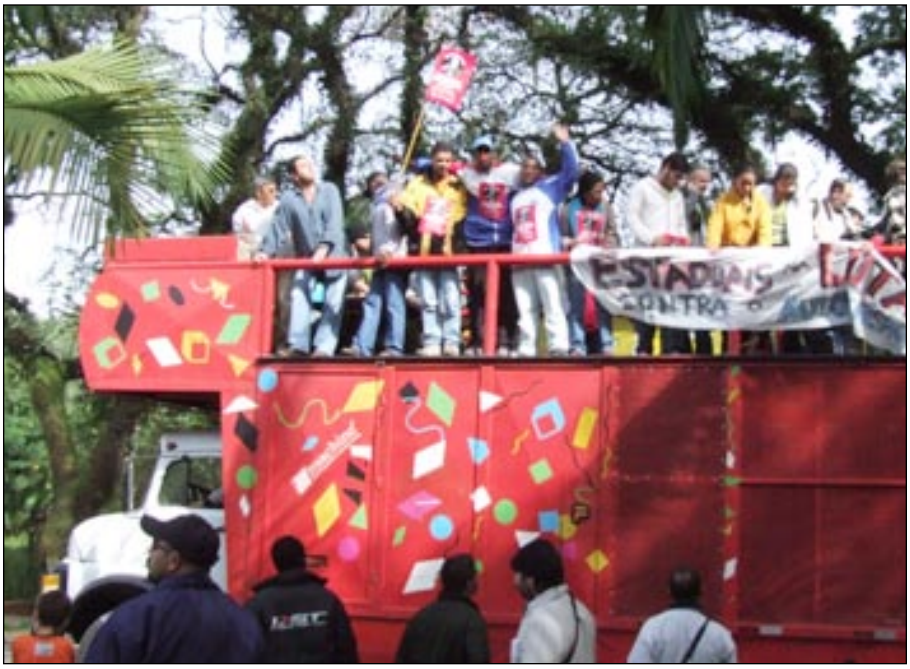
After graduating, Raphi taught theater and performance techniques to prisoners and underprivileged youth in Rio de Janeiro and throughout the San Francisco Bay Area. His initial stop in Brazil is Sao Paulo. During his ICWA fellowship, he plans to document and work with community-based performance initiatives in Brazil's rural northeast region, in the Amazon, and in Rio de Janeiro.

other, as the entire march jammed itself into the narrow cul-de-sac in front of the Legislative building. A special debate was in session, but plenty of people still in their offices pressed their faces against the glass to watch the march, or turned their attention to a game of football on an impressively large TV in a second-floor hallway. As the sky darkened and the rain got colder, a long line of blank-faced men in grey uniforms had appeared at the entrance to the Legislature, and it became clear that it was only a matter of time before the Military Police would be ordered to disperse the procession. I decided that I'd had enough excitement for my first day in São Paulo, and more than enough rain for the next six months, so I hailed a cab back toward downtown, where I planned to buy a paper and figure out what the hell was going on.

As a performer with an activist background, I've long been interested in the merger of performance and politics. Since I was 18, standing in a human chain in front of the Seattle Marriott during the 1999 WTO protests, I've been especially interested in how a public space can be shaped, reclaimed, and altered by the performance of political actions. In Seattle, my first major political action, protestors dressed as sea turtles designated the streets as a site for pageantry, only to be beaten back choking as heavily armored police emptied crowded intersections with tear gas and pepper spray. There, and for months afterwards, the defining chant at political events throughout the city was: "Whose streets? *Our* streets!" It doesn't have much in terms of meter or rhyme scheme, but it works surprisingly well on paper.

The chant also describes very ably the performative role of a protest. By taking to the streets, by following some conventions and creating new ones, by adhering to some rules and disregarding others, a public protest not only raises awareness of the issue at hand, but also brings into sharp focus the day-to-day activities of a city, a political system, a power structure. In the continuing struggle over university autonomy in São Paulo, different forms of protest have served not only to repudiate a new, bureaucratized vision of public education, but also to question the educational system as a microcosm of Brazilian society.

"Political theatre" in the United States tends to mean one of two things, neither of them good. It refers either to posturing by an individual or political party that rivals deem excessive or unnecessary, or else to a propagandistic performance with a crudely stated message that refined audience members deem excessive or unnecessary. I assume that readers will find examples of each in the snippets below, but I also hope they'll take away a somewhat broader sense of where performance exists, what it constitutes, and what some of its potential may be. I'll be writing more in my next newsletter — and a lot more, presumably, over the next couple of years — about the



A trio eletrico leads off the march toward the Palácio dos Bandeirantes on May 31st.

different shapes, textures, and types of political performance, and what business the concepts of performance and politics have cavorting together in the first place. For now, though, I'd like to focus on what I learned by following a chant down Avenida Paulista.

Serra - ladrão!
Serrou educação!

Serra - thief!
He sawed down education!

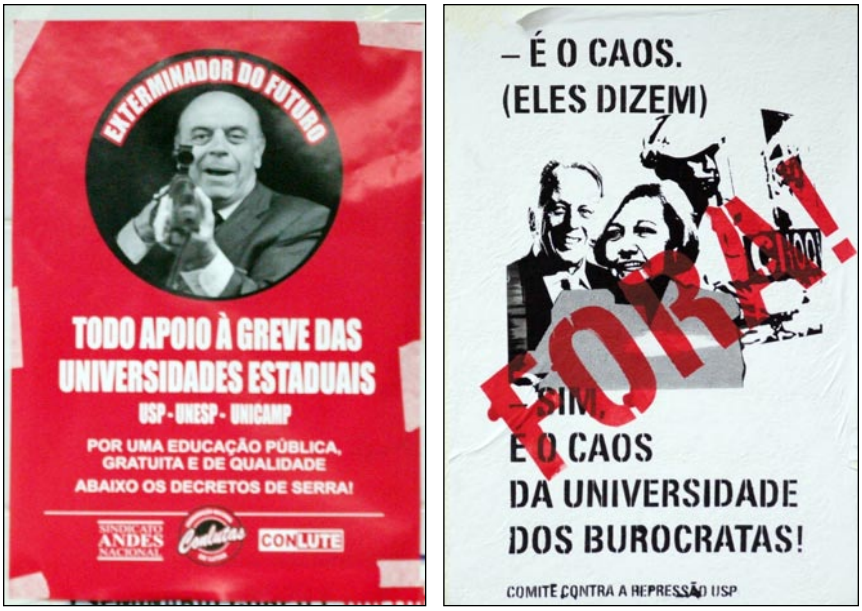
José Serra's appearance lends itself easily to caricatures, even for a politician. His fixed, ever-so-slightly menacing stare and perpetual grimace (even when smiling) make him an easy target. Stickers, banners and cartoons from the past month's education controversy portrayed him as a vulture, a trigger-happy mafioso, and an angry, multi-tentacled octopus, viciously grabbing hold of university buildings. (This may also have been a kind of visual pun, since the Portuguese word for squid is *"lula."*) Yet the most eerily accurate Serra caricature I've seen was the cartoon posted on the wall inside the occupied *reitoria* at USP that showed the governor as a deviously grinning Mr. Burns, the billionaire villain from *The Simpsons*.

After losing the 2002 Presidential run-off to Lula with less than 40 percent of the vote, Serra retreated from politics briefly before serving as mayor of São Paulo for 15 months. In 2006, he entered the race for the governorship of São Paulo state, which he won with a clear majority (58 percent of the vote) in the first round, the first time a modern candidate had done so. Once ensconced in office on January 1, 2007, he did what any popularly elected leader would do: radically reform the state's political infrastructure through a series of unilateral decrees. The second — and by now the most notorious — was Decree 51.461, which elaborated the role of the Secretary of Higher Education, newly created out of what had formerly been the Secretary of Tourism.

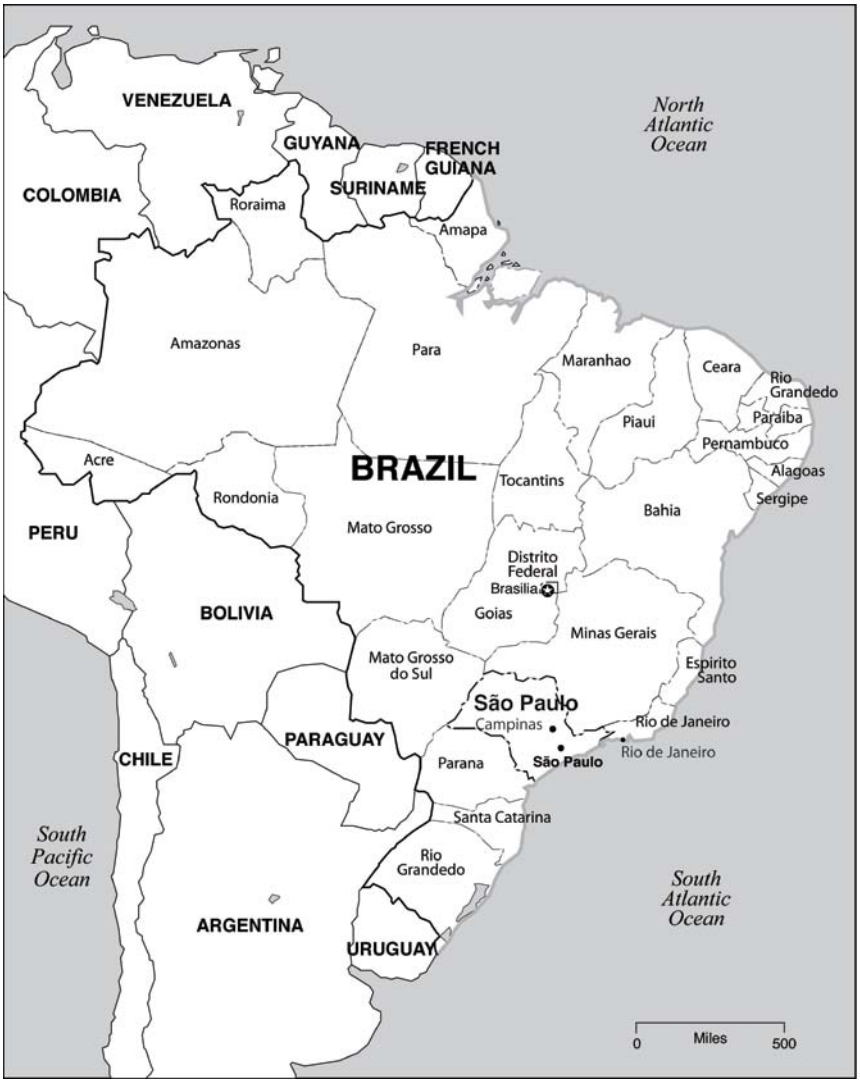
Serra, apparently, was on a crusade to bureaucratize the public university system. Whereas previously, each university submitted a generalized monthly budget, Serra's decree required each department to submit a complete, line-item budget each month, and for all material acquisitions to be pre-approved by the Secretary for Higher Education. Decree 51.461 also granted broad disciplinary and curricular oversight — previously left to universities or individual departments — to the Secretary of Higher Education's office, and established a complex hierarchy of governmental administrators essentially charged with keeping universities in line. Serra's next decree, 51.471, granted the governor the power (to be used "exceptionally") to override or pre-empt university admissions and hiring decisions.

University autonomy is guaranteed under the Brazilian constitution; after 21 years of military dictatorship, which the student movement (including a young José Serra) played a significant role in bringing to a close, it is considered one of the cornerstones of democracy. Although Decree 51.461 states at the end of its second chapterthat the new office will carry out its duties with an eye toward "university autonomy and the specific characteristics of each university," significant constitutional challenges have been raised, with a number of cases still pending.

So Serra's sense of constitutionality may well have been more than a little off when he issued the decrees, and his tact in issuing them so early in his term was more than questionable. But his political timing was even worse. Serra released his decrees at a time when Lula's educational reforms were coming under increased scrutiny. Since his first election, Lula's stated focus on social progress has not advanced nearly as quickly or as thoroughly as hoped for by Brazil's vocal left wing. The left has vilified him for filling cabinet positions with PSDB and PMDB (the centrist Brazilian Democratic Movement Party) members, for not taking adequate advantage of Brazil's recent economic growth, and for playing nice with symbols of gringo power ranging from the World Economic Forum to — most damningly — George W. Bush. Worse still in the minds of Brazil's leftists were recent budget proposals that not only failed to adjust professor's salaries and student aid to inflation,



(Left) "Exterminator of the Future:" a popular anti-Serra poster. (Right) "It's Chaos (They Say) - Yes, It's the Chaos of a University of Bureaucrats!" Pro-occupation poster showing Suely Vilela with José Pinotti, Secretary of Higher Education.



but actually cut government spending on public education below levels in place when Lula took office.

Then there was Lula's PROUNI (University for All) program. Like so many of Lula's initiatives, PROUNI was intended to make everybody happy; the program provides increased opportunities for low-income students in private universities, and grants significant tax breaks and other goodies to participating institutions. But private colleges in Brazil — with very few exceptions, like Rio de Janeiro's Pontífica Universidade Católica — are considered vastly inferior to public institutions, and graduates are subsequently at a significant disadvantage in the job market compared to their peers with degrees from public colleges.

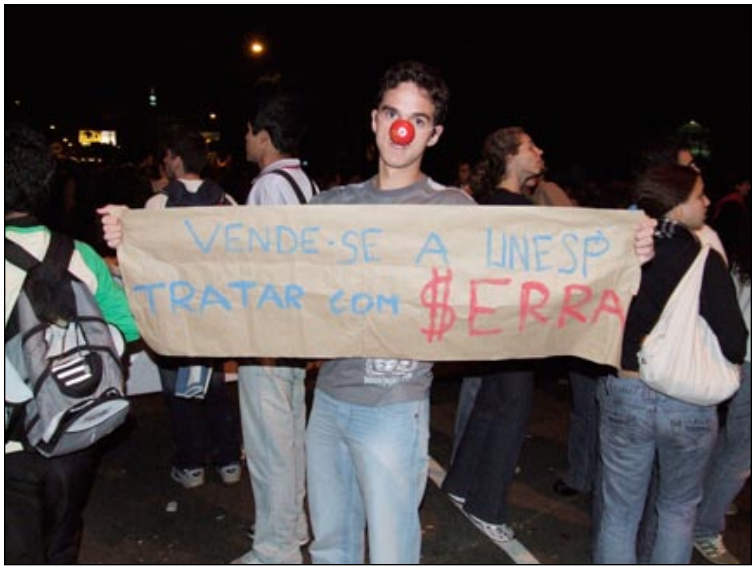
Public university education is free in Brazil to anyone who can pass entrance exams. In practice, however, this limits the vast majority of opportunities at public colleges to students whose families could afford to send them to private high schools and course reviews. Furthermore, many private colleges are popularly considered, or explicitly conceived of, as primarily money-making institutions. Many Brazilians, therefore, consider PROUNI to be sacrificing public funds (in the form of potential tax gains) to benefit private industry in service of a band-aid solution that would leave even the program's direct beneficiaries at a relative disadvantage.

USP, meanwhile, has suffered from a low-level housing crisis for years. USP's Collective Residential Housing (CRUSP) has no room for the overflow of hundreds of students without the time or money to commute from their homes on the city's periphery or beyond. Stirred into action by the confluence of Serra's agenda, Lula's financial cuts, the housing crisis, and a perceived lack of a student voice on campus, students at USP, Brazil's largest and most prestigious university, called a number of campus-wide meetings to urge the *reitora*, a single office encompassing what in the United States might be divided into Chancellor, President, and Dean, to respond to the perceived assault on public education.

The *reitora*, Suely Vilela, would not attend or respond to requests for public meetings over the course of four months. Vilela, considered by many students to be a Serra loyalist, also refused to send a representative to meet with students, in spite of repeated requests and invitations. Finally, after four months with no response from the *reitora*, much of the student body assembled on May 3rd to discuss an appropriate response to what was perceived as a communication vacuum. Vilela was informed of the meeting weeks in advance and urged to attend or to send a representative, but she did not respond to the invitation. Students learned later that Vilela was at a conference in Spain on the day of the meeting. Once again, no representatives of the administration attended. Well over a hundred students marched from the meeting to the *reitoria*, which they placed under occupation, apparently with little resistance from campus security. Soon afterward, the school's departments began to go on strike. At the height of the movement, all but four of 29 academic faculties were participating. Copycat strikes in protest of Serra's decrees and in support of the USP students began at UNESP (the State University of São Paulo) and at UNICAMP (the state-funded University of Campinas, in the interior of the state). Soon, public higher education throughout São Paulo state was virtually shut down.

The USP occupation had been in place for about two weeks when the city and state governments began making preparations to send in a police squad to clear the students out by force. The officer in charge set a deadline of May 24th for students to abandon the *reitoria*. The deadline passed and the occupation dominated the

headlines (with a poll in the leading Folha de São Paulo newspaper showing that 60 percent of readers favored the use of force to end the occupation), but the raid did not come. Students I talked to later in the occupied *reitoria* told me that a raid would have effectively ended Serra's political career. As resentful as much of the public may have been toward the occupiers, the sight of cops breaking up a student movement would have harkened back too clearly to the all-too-recent dictatorship. The police squadron commander contented himself with giving frequent interviews boasting of his team's readiness, while the occupiers spread the word for an upcoming *manifestação*.

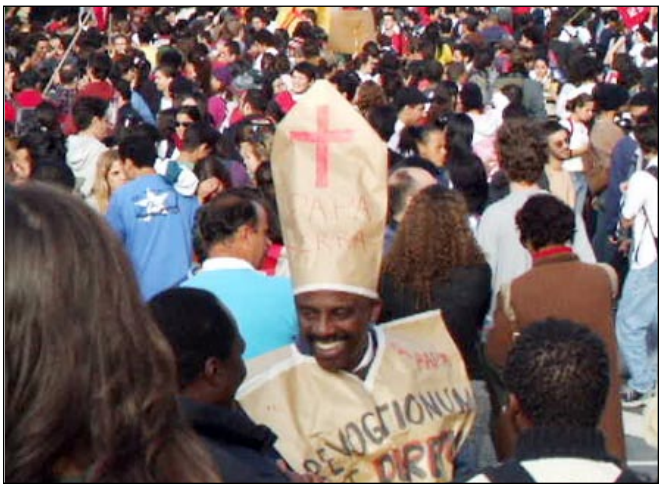


UNESP (the State University of São Paulo) student at the May 31st protest. The sign reads, "For sale: UNESP. Deal with $erra."

> *Ô Serra! A culpa é sua!*
> *Hoje a aula é na rua!*
>
> Hey, Serra! It's your fault!
> Today, class is in the street!

There were, alas, no dancing cows as the May 31st march set out from the front of the *reitoria* at 12:30 p.m., but plenty of clowns took their places, along with a few witches, a consortium of folks in soldier gear, and — best of all — a middle-aged "Pope Serra," outfitted in a brown paper mitre and cassock. Three trios *elétricos* of varying size and acousti power, as well as a samba bateria, were strategically arranged around the thousands of marchers (organizers estimated 10,000; the police said 2,000). This march was scheduled to proceed to the Palácio dos Bandeirantes, the governor's mansion a few miles away from the main USP campus, to present the students' and workers' case to Serra himself.

Protests in Brazil almost always look and sound like a Carnaval street parade. From time to time, protestors organize in a small picket without costumes or music, or else a protest might turn violent instead of festive, leading to fisticuffs, stone-throwing, or worse as crowds build and energy escalates. But successful political manifestations will almost always incorporate at least one aspect of Carnaval. This march to the Palácio dos Bandeirantes had four immediately evident aspects of Carnaval: the *trios elétricos*, long-time staples of Carnaval street parades; the samba *bateria*; the costumed marchers; and the ubiquitous street vendors weaving their way along the parade margins and occasionally into the madding crowd, selling beer, soda, and snacks from pushcarts and styrofoam coolers.

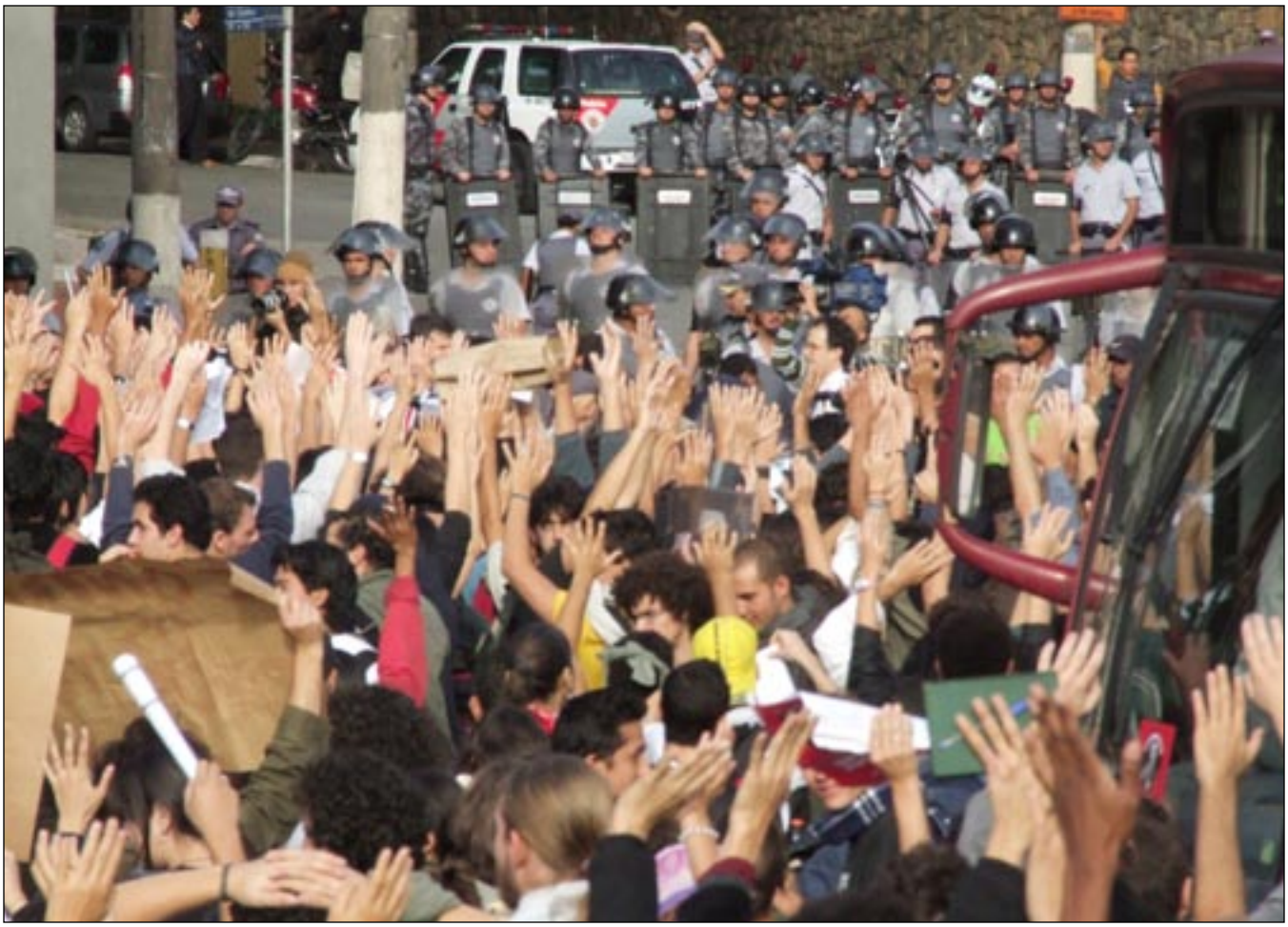


"Pope Serra" greets admirers

Far from detracting from the political force of a given movement, the Carnaval atmosphere strengthens many Brazilian protests, not only by attracting more marchers and spectators, but also through the implicit association of a march with Carnaval. Beyond being a quintessentially Brazilian celebration, Carnaval is also quintessentially democratic. By taking the shape of Carnaval, borrowing and absorbing its forms, a political protest makes a clear claim of representing the people. It's a neat trick, really: the more beer-swilling clowns, samba drummers, and dancing cows come together, the more democratic a political movement becomes, or at least appears.

As the march passed southward through the USP campus gates, a group of teachers from a neighborhood pre-school lined up their students at the fence to wave to the passing clowns and bop up and down to the drums. The speaker on the second-largest *trio elétrico* didn't miss a beat: "Whoever wants a quality university, raise your hand!" The preschoolers' hands went up — with some coaching from their teachers — and the back half of the parade broke into jubilant cheers.

Beyond the elements of Carnaval, the May 31st *manifestação* had an almost eerily familiar appearance. The age of globalization — and of anti-globalization protests — seems to have created a universal protest aesthetic. First, there's always a visible *cause célèbre* of marginal relevance to the protest at hand. In the United States, any major rally will feature a bevy of "Free Mumia" signs; in Brazil,



Students in front of a blocked city bus raise their hands, in a gesture of pacifism, as military police look on.

there is always a squadron of flags and banners from the MST (Landless Worker's Movement). (It's interesting, in observing the state of politics and protest in each country, that the MST, which has no single individual as a symbol, has had considerable political successes in the past several years, whereas the movement to free Mumia Abu-Jamal is based around one charismatic prisoner who has yet to be granted even a retrial.) Then there is the requisite giant puppet, this one a menacing, black-robed José Serra who had, for some reason, gained a goatee for the occasion. Finally, in recognition of the more than a thousand Military Police officers in varying degrees of riot gear stationed between USP and the Palácio de Bandeirantes, many of the students — especially those in the front of the march — were sporting tear-gas chic: handkerchiefs or Palestinian-style checkered head scarves tied over noses and mouths, as well as a gas mask or two. A number of students had also borrowed another element of classic protest aesthetics. They were holding white carnations to hand to military police officers.

The protest made it as far as the intersection of Avenida Morumbi with Avenida Francisco Morato, at which point scores of military police blocked access on all sides. The *trios elétricos* moved to block oncoming traffic, and a human chain formed on the north side of the protest. Between the police lines and the protestors, Avenidas Morumbi and Francisco Morato — both major thoroughfares — were completed closed off, as were a number of side streets. A line of paralyzed busses began to form on Francisco Morato. Within a few minutes, it curved out of sight.

A tense half hour passed as more and more cops in full riot gear arrived, until they completely surrounded the marchers. Every few minutes, one of the walls of riot police would raise shields, nightsticks, or pepper-spray canisters, and a sea of protestors' hands would shoot up, signaling their non-violent conduct. From the *trios elétricos*, march organizers urged the protestors to stand their ground without provoking confrontation: "Our movement is a pacifist movement, but it's not afraid of the police."

That, unfortunately, was about as dramatic and inspiring as anything from the *trios elétricos* got all day. The trucks, originally designed to broadcast music down thronged streets, limited themselves almost exclusively to political speeches, which created a very familiar, dime-a-dozen protest tone to go along with the global protest aesthetic. While we heard occasional words of impassioned inspiration from students, the bulk of the talking came from middle-aged men associated with CONLUTAS, a leftist conglomerate union that organizes protests throughout Brazil. These ranged from typical pie-in-the-sky entreaties for the police to drop their body armor and join the workers to apologies to the motorcycle

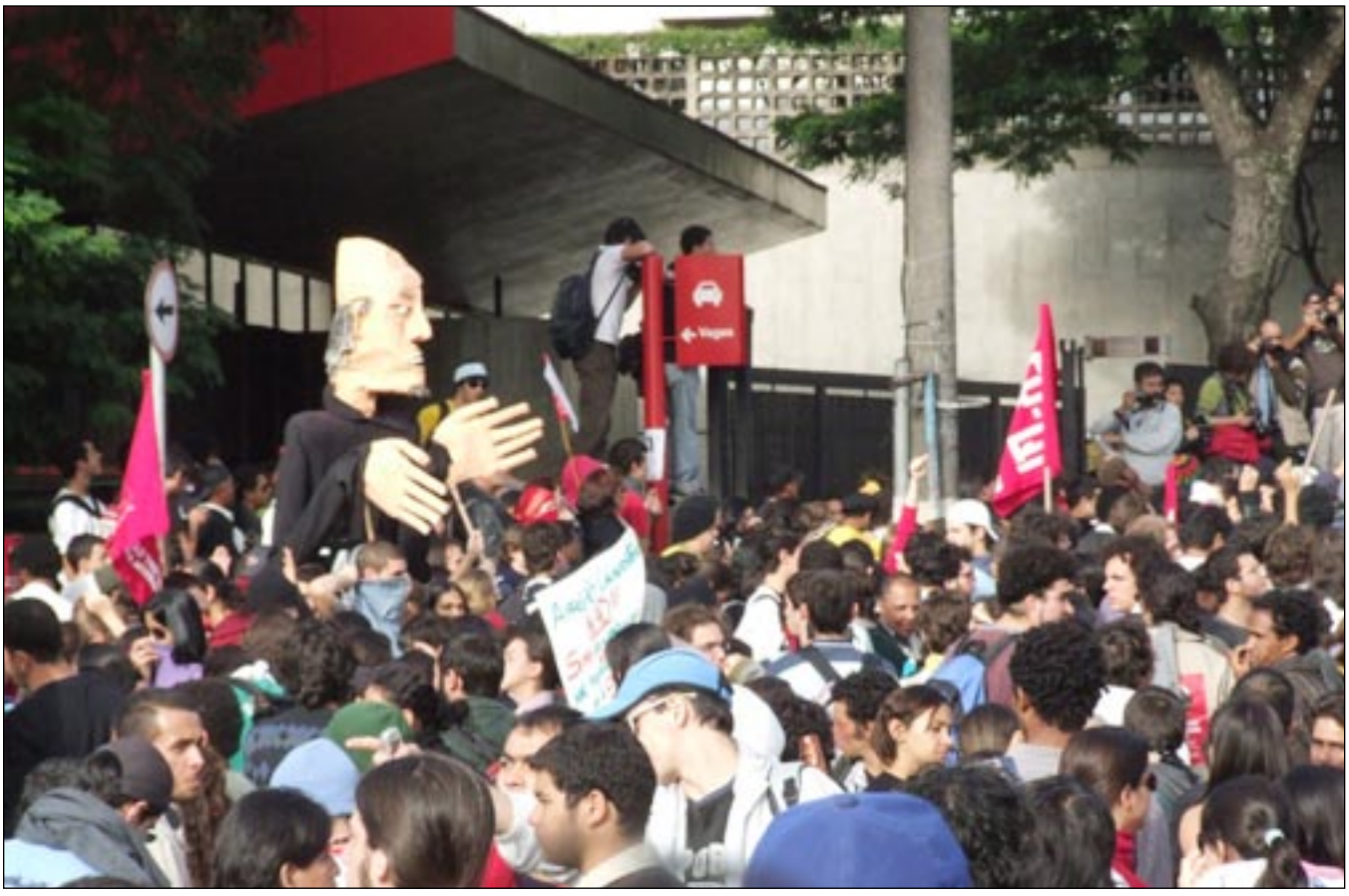
delivery boys who grumbled as they walked their bikes around the perimeters of the barricades. "Remember, this traffic jam is all José Serra's fault...he wouldn't let us march to the Palácio!" A few minutes later, from the same trio, a speaker announced: "We shut down São Paulo... over 120 kilometers of traffic backed up!" (I haven't found any reports to confirm these figures. However, based on a recent newspaper article, 120 kilometers of stalled traffic would only be about the 10th worst day of traffic in São Paulo this year, well behind the jams caused by major accidents).

As the afternoon wore on, it became clear that — short of a few tiny skirmishes at the front of the march, in which police pepper-sprayed under a dozen students — the police were restraining themselves, as well as restricting marchers' movement. Protest organizers dispatched a commission of 16 students and workers to negotiate with representatives at the Palácio dos Bandeirantes, while the rest of the protest stayed in place, buying beers and popcorn from vendors and listening to an anonymous middle-aged guy on top of the main *trio elétrico* ask the *bateria* to please quiet down for another speaker. Many of the students, marching for the first time, learned a very important lesson: even civil disobedience can be boring. To their credit, they showed impressive restraint, and not only in avoiding skirmishes with the riot cops. Not until four hours into the protest did the air started to smell of marijuana.

The pot smoke soon wafted away, but the dull force of the same political rhetoric hung heavy in the air for several hours, with only sporadic updates and a very occasional burst of movement along Avenida Morumbi, where police shot pepper-spray into a front line that may or may not have been throwing bits of paper. Finally, as the sun set, it was announced to much excitement that the commission that had been sent to the Palácio was returning. Soon, Avenida Morumbi was lit up with harsh camera lights as the commission made its way back to the *trios elétricos*.

After pausing for about half an hour to talk to the media — while the *trios elétricos* first beseeched them to report back to their *companheiros*, and then, when that proved futile, explained to said *companheiros* that it was important for "all of Brazil" to hear what had happened at the Palácio dos Bandeirantes — the commission finally got word to the rally that, not surprisingly, nothing had changed. Serra had gone home for the night, so the protestors could either remain until the next morning, or head back to USP. While one *trio elétrico* speaker praised the protestors' moral high ground and cited the 120 kilometers of stalled traffic as proof of an unparalleled victory, another took an informal straw-poll of the protestors, all but a few dozen of whom were more than ready to return to the *reitoria*.

The procession was by no means dispirited as it shuffled back to USP. The size of the protest seemed to inspire a number of the participants, and the lack of sig-



José Serra — in puppet form — watches over the May 31st manifestação.

nificant police action seemed, for many of the marchers, to represent at least a partial victory. As an outsider, I wasn't especially impressed. The *manifestação* had fallen short of its stated goal of arriving at the Palácio dos Bandeirantes and demonstrating the movement's vitality in front of José Serra. Furthermore, once we made it to the corner of Avenida Morumbi, the march didn't move, either physically or figuratively. Had the culture shock and dancing cows from the previous week's *manifestação* tricked me into thinking this was anything more than a run-of-the-mill student movement? Halfway to the *reitoria*, one of the *trios elétricos* finally began playing some music: *"Que País é Esse?"* (What Country is This?), a classic protest song by the rock band Legião Urbana. The crowd around me started to dance for the first time in hours, and I got excited to see in which direction the occupation — the invisible focal point for much of the afternoon — was going.

Nas ruas! Nas praças!
Quem disse que sumiu?
Aqui está presente o movimento estudantil!

On the streets! In the plazas!
Who said it disappeared?
The student movement is present here!

Student movements have played crucial, and often defining, roles in the creation of a democratic Brazil. When they called themselves a student movement, USP's protestors were not only stating the obvious, but also linking their battle against Serra's decrees to previous struggles that, at least in retrospect, enjoy almost universal support. Students were key members of the *"Direitos Já"* movement of the late 1970s and early 80s, which helped fell the military dictatorship and usher in Brazil's first direct democratic elections in 1989. And in 1992, when the first directly elected government proved irredeemably corrupt, it was the *caras pintadas* — students with painted faces who stormed the streets by the thousands — who proved to be the turning point in affecting the impeachment of President Fernando Collor de Mello.

The anti-Serra student movement was undeniably visible in the streets and in the plazas, but it, unlike previous movements, had a single, obvious locus in the occupied *reitoria* at USP. The tire barricade in front of the building — painted in reds, blues, and yellows with political slogans, abstract patterns, and smiley faces — had quickly become a symbol of resistance in a network of pro-occupation websites, and of "chaos" and "commotion" in the mainstream media.

As the march wound down, scores of students — especially curious out-of-towners from Campinas — began pouring into the *reitoria*. A student-run security commission (all of whose members were male) stood guard under a yellow tarpaulin cocoon set up over the entrance, limiting admission to anyone with a student or worker's identity card. Happily, my still unexpired student travel card fit the bill. That night, and each subsequent visit, the security commission was only too happy to welcome an American inside to see what it was all about.

Every revolution has its own semantic, and after a full day spent standing just a little too close to the main *trio elétrico*, words like *companheiro* and *independência* were literally still ringing in my ears, albeit faintly. After all the hubbub in the press over the tire barricade — which stretched, at most, 15 feet in either direction, and topped out at four feet at its highest point — I was ready for red-washed corridors, black graffiti everywhere (as I had seen throughout the campus), overturned desks and chairs, maybe even an indoor bonfire to match the pile of burning logs outside. Instead, I found scrubbed floors and what, save for turnstiles that had been uprooted from the entrance and pushed to the side, could have passed for a fairly tidy dorm room writ large. The rooms had been renamed and assigned to various task forces: Press Commission, Pro-Occupation Commission, Food Commission. The busts of famous scholars wore wigs and make-up. The walls were covered with poems and cartoons, written on pieces of office paper that had been taped in place for easy removal. And someone's pet cat had taken up residence in one of the inner courtyards. Like a cinder block wall peeking through a psychedelic tapestry, however, the *reitoria* had retained its dull, administrative feel.

Talking to the buildings' occupiers — mostly humanities students in their early 20s — it became clear that this

The reitoria, *seen through the tire barricade.*

The entrance to the reitoria *in the news, post-occupation.*

lack of destruction was, in no small part, the point. XY, a 20-year-old history student who, out of fear of future police action, wouldn't tell me her real name (she briefly considered "007" as an alias) recounted that, when the reitoria was under administrative control, students were effectively *personae non gratae*. When, earlier in the year, she had come to ask for a copy of her transcript, she'd had to stand in line for half an hour, show her ID, fill out a form, have her picture taken, and then wait for an official escort to walk her through the turnstiles to the appropriate office. XY had never taken part in a political movement before, but had joined the occupation on its second day. She was impressed by the democratic structure and the lack of hierarchy in decision-making. "No one tells you what to do," she said. "If you want food, you cook it on the bonfire. If you don't like the barricade, go paint it." The occupiers clearly felt that the *reitoria* was in better hands under their control.

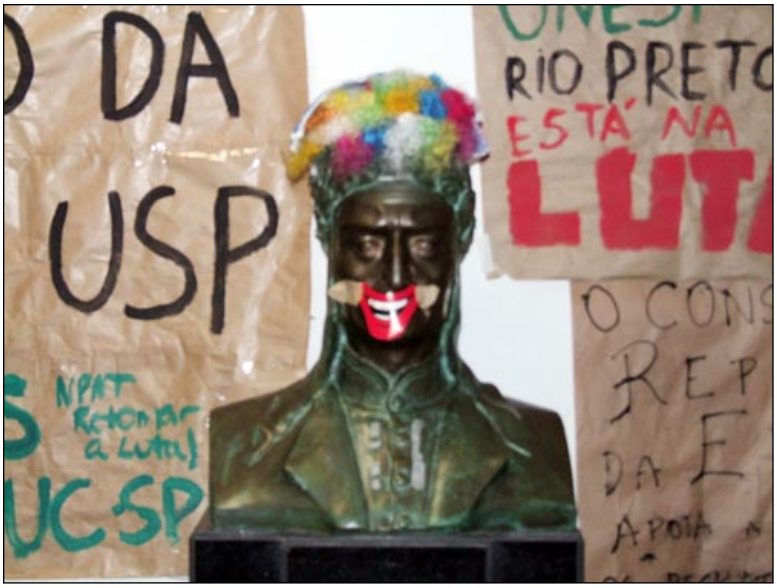
Insofar as the day-to-day organization of the occupation had a guiding ethos, "do-as-you-will" was pretty much it. Anyone welcomed into the building became part of the occupation. Most of the cartoons, drawing and manifestos posted on the walls, often on administrative letterhead, were the responsibility of the Press Commission (often on administrative letterhead, with titles crossed out and "OCCUPATION!" penciled in underneath the school seal). Other large swaths of the wall, however, served as sites for general expression. My favorite was the "False Rumors Commission" wall, which contained signed "endorsements" of the occupation from football legends, Romário dedicated his 1000th goal to university autonomy, a number of dead American rock stars, Borat, the fictional Kazakhstani journalist, who signed, in English, "If government doesn't kill Borat, I help communists!", Ché Guevara; and — inexplicably — Nicholas Sarkozy, the right-wing French president-elect.

In spite of the predominant freedom that prevailed, XY explained that the occupiers adhered to a strict code of conduct. Students smoked cigarettes in the *reitoria*, but no drugs or alcohol were allowed inside. No university property was destroyed, XY told me (not counting, of course, the letterhead that was used for announcements and cartoons), and all private files were left undisturbed, even apparently those on the computers re-appropriated by the Press Commission. Though the occupation apparently had access to all of the buildings' ten or more floors, the student presence was limited to the ground level.

The space was loosely organized. One long corridor was filled with mattresses and designated as a general dormitory, but students also parked themselves in sleeping bags on benches or desks. A drum circle seemed to operate more or less around the clock, playing occupation-appropriate music: old school samba and Bob Marley. Musicians dropped in and out, while others chatted or napped on nearby benches. The organization of the occupation seemed to have a similarly drop-in approach. The commissions were apparently open to all students and workers who wanted to join, although there were notable gender imbalances in, for example, the security and food commissions.

The entire occupation operated on a revolving-door basis. While most of the original group of students was still present, others had since joined, and no one seemed to be tied down to the building. XY, for example, frequently spent the afternoon at her parents' house to have lunch and a hot shower. This freedom of movement — a constant influx of new people, as well as the ability, for many of the students, to take a breather — seemed integral to the mental health of the occupation's participants, and also to the general hygiene of the *reitoria*. (There was, however, an especially nasty cold circulating in the *reitoria* that my immune system, unaccustomed to South American bugs, picked up with alarming alacrity).

Since the occupation began, the university administration and the press had begun to raise many of the



A re-decorated bust in the central corridor of the reitoria

complaints that students had made when Suely Vilela was still in charge. The relative lack of student access had morphed into a students-only rule, and those of us who brought cameras inside were warned to have all of our images approved by the Press Commission. On the other hand, the opposition beyond the barricade was not exactly negotiating in good faith. The looming threat of a police invasion was held up as justification for barring anyone without student or worker credentials, and the Security Commission pointed me to a group of police summonses posted on the wall as proof that any pictures showing occupiers' faces could be used against them. Suely Vilela had begun to press for a charge of 1,000 real (about US$520) per day to be levied against any student who could be proved to have taken part in the occupation. And while the Security and Press Commissions kept relatively tight controls, by no means did they completely obscure free expression. A near-constant media presence hovered at the *reitoria*'s entrance, conducting constant interviews with any student who would stick around for long enough.

The straw-poll vote that had ended the rally turned out to be a paltry imitation of the painstakingly dedicated exercise in democracy that was an occupation assembly. On June 1, the meeting passed through three incarnations. First, students made an attempt to meet in a circle and to self-govern with hand signals, without any designated facilitators. After an hour of disagreements over points of order, and of struggling with acoustics and space, the meeting changed venues to a interior courtyard — away from the media — and reverted to the proscenium style, with a facilitating committee sitting at the front and calling on speakers one at a time. After 15 minutes, the students voted overwhelmingly to move the assembly outside. Finally, the third stage of the assembly began: by the time it was over, the meeting had lasted almost six hours.

The facilitators — who had been the subject of over an hour of debate in the first, round-table incarnation of the assembly — sat at a table in the front of the crowd, passed around a single microphone to speak, and had the patience of saints. So did most of the assembly. In the interest of non-hierarchical democracy, the entire collective voted on each point of order. Just before midnight — with at least 600 people still sitting patiently on the concrete ground in front of the *reitoria* — the table called for a vote on the evening's crucial debate, as distilled from the previous 30 speakers' proposals: should the students set guidelines which, if met by Vilela, would result in an end to the occupation in the next week? Or should it continue with no deadline in sight until Vilela was assumed to be negotiating in good faith? As with previous questions, students were asked to show their votes with both hands, and as hundreds of hands went up for the first proposal, there were audible gasps from throughout the plaza. An overwhelming majority, however, approved a continued occupation with no guidelines, to chants of "Occupy! Occupy!"

Miguel, a soft-spoken student in the "World Affairs" program at EACH, USP's campus in São Paulo's poorer East Zone, stood next to me throughout the assembly and offered a half-hearted, one-handed vote for establishing guidelines. He seemed content with the continued occupation, though, and unperturbed by some of the more vitriolic speakers who seemed to question his loyalty to the movement. ("Whoever wants to set guidelines has never been with the occupation in the first place!") He trusted his fellow students to make the right decision, he told me, even if he didn't agree with it. Based on how long the occupation had lasted, he had faith in the student assembly. "Any time you want to organize this many people, it's *almost* impossible," he told me, stressing the "almost." The meeting was still going, reviewing some previous announcements of upcoming events, and in front of the bonfire, samba drums were starting up, but Miguel had a long bus ride back to the East Zone, and planned to be up early to rejoin the occupation the next morning.

Sejamos realistas — façamos o impossível!

Let's be realists — let's do the impossible!
(Butcher paper sign inside the *reitoria*)

Tom Zé had been forgetting lyrics and key words for much of the afternoon, but no one seemed to mind. Zé — a legendary musician who moved to São Paulo from the rural northeast in the 1960s with a group of friends including later superstars like Gal Costa, Caetano Veloso, and Gilberto Gil (Brazil's current Minister of Culture) — had been impressed by the student movement, and had volunteered to play a show inside the *reitoria*'s central room on June 2nd. The concert had opened with a couple of songs from the members of the drum circle, who assumed

the role of back-up band as Zé and his guitarist, who he said he brings along to "anything crazy", proceeded into a mish-mash of songs and good-naturedly sarcastic reflections on Brazilian politics.

Zé's concert was scheduled for 1:00 p.m., and he arrived around 2:30; a significant delay even by Brazilian standards, though no one seemed to mind. He appeared to have crawled out of bed and directly to the *reitoria*. He may have been a little hung-over, or maybe a bit stoned, but he looked a lot younger than his 71 years, and was clearly thrilled to play for free to a bunch of college kids. Surrounded by about 500 students, almost all of whom knew every word — including the ones that he missed — Zé marveled that the students' political commitment hadn't dampened their capacity for fun.

The occupation, Zé said, was an inspiration for him. He described it as an organic movement committed to issues, rather than the abstract ideological struggles that he remembered from the 1970s, as the dictatorship wore on. Zé praised their capacity for humor, remembering his own experiences of playing a private concert for a federal police censor at the height of the dictatorship. He recalled grimacing through the more obvious double entendres and subversive wordplay, each time glancing up to meet the censor's impassive stare. Finally, at the end of the session, there was a long silence as the censor glared at Zé. "And then, " Zé grinned, "what did he do? He smiled! 'You can play it *all!*'"

I don't think Tom Zé's story was meant as a metaphor, to tell the kids in the *reitoria* that their persistence would be easily rewarded as soon as they found the right audience. For one thing, his reminiscences of the dictatorship continued as the concert went on, including passing mentions of friends who had been exiled or disappeared. Instead, Zé's mini-history lesson seemed to enjoin his audience to appreciate what they had built. He couldn't predict what would happen to their movement or to the issues at hand, although he made it clear that he had very little faith in any current office holders in Brazil or beyond. But Zé recognized the occupation as a success in and of itself: that the loosest coalition, founded in frustration in early May, was still going strong, had not disbanded, was together enough to hold a campus-wide forum one night and a Tom Zé concert the next afternoon. That was worth celebrating.

The occupation lasted almost another three weeks. On June 22, Suely Vilela (the USP *reitora*) signed a letter drafted by the occupiers, pledging to establish a Congress elected by students, workers, and professors to advise on administrative issues, to hold public meetings to answer student concerns, to begin the process of constructing new housing on campus, to open a campus-wide dialogue on the topic of university autonomy, and finally, in her capacity as head of the university, not to punish students

Tom Zé conducting his audience inside the reitoria. All of my concert footage avoids showing any students' faces, in accordance with the Press Commission's rules.

involved in the occupation. The students held a final clean-up and left the *reitoria* later that evening. The lack of rules that had been so integral to the movement resulted in unfortunate final images of near total immaturity that, to many, besmirched the larger movement. A few students doused members of the media who tried to force their way into the building in soapy water, while others left a gruesome effigy of Suely Vilela hanging from a nearby tree. A few days later, the strike was called off.

It's still not clear whether the students will have their chance to meet face-to-face with José Serra, or whether the representatives of the Federal, State, or Municipal governments will press charges. It is clear that, at least for now, the momentum of the USP student movement continues. On the official blog of the occupation, students noted that: "Only the occupation of the *reitoria* has ended! Tomorrow will be bigger!" Back on June 2, after his finale — an anti-Iraq war song called "Companheiro Bush" — Tom Zé beamed out at the audience. "You guys are a force against...what's the word? The second law of dynamics... universal dynamics...what's it called?"

"Entropy!"

"Yeah! You're a force against entropy!" ❑

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Kay Dilday • FRANCE/MOROCCO • October 2005 - December 2007

Kay is studying the relationships of the French and North African immigrants in France and in North Africa. A former editor for The *New York Times* Op-Ed page, Kay holds a master's degree in comparative international politics and theory from the Graduate Center of the City University of New York, a bachelor's degree in English literature from Tufts University, and has done graduate work at the Universiteit van Amsterdam in the Netherlands and the *Cours de Civilisation de la Sorbonne*.

Suzy Hansen • TURKEY • April 2007 - 2009

A John O. Crane Memorial Fellow, Suzy will be writing about politics and religion in Turkey. A former editor at the *New York Observer,* her work has also appeared in *Salon*, the *New York Times Book Review*, the *Nation*, and other publications. She graduated from the University of Pennsylvania in 1999.

Derek Mitchell • INDIA • September 2007 - 2009

As a Phillips Talbot Fellow, Derek will explore the impact of global trade and economic growth on Indians living in poverty. He has served for the past year as a volunteer for Swaraj Peeth, an institute in New Delhi dedicated to nonviolent conflict resolution and Mahatma Gandhi's thought. Previously he was a Fulbright scholar in India at the Gandhi Peace Foundation. He has coordinated foreign policy research at George Washington University's Institute for Communitarian Policy Studies and worked as a political organizer in New Hampshire. Derek graduated with a degree in religion from Columbia University.

Nicholas Schmidle • PAKISTAN • February 2006 - 2008

Nick is a freelance writer interested in the intersection of culture, religion, and politics in Asia. He's in Pakistan as an ICWA fellow, examining issues of ethnic, sectarian, and national identity. Previously, he reported from Central Asia and Iran. His work has been published in the *Washington Post,* the *Weekly Standard, Foreign Policy, the Christian Science Monitor*, and elsewhere. He holds a master's degree in International Affairs from American University.

Raphael Soifer • BRAZIL • April 2007-2009

An actor, director, playwright, musician and theatre educator, Raphi Soifer is a Donors' Fellow studying, as a participant and observer, the relationship between the arts and social change in communities throughout Brazil. He has worked as a performer and director in the United States and Brazil, and has taught performance to prisoners and underprivileged youth through People's Palace Projects in Rio de Janeiro and Community Works in San Francisco. He holds a bachelor's degree in Theatre Studies and Anthropology from Yale University.

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Phone: (202) 364-4068
Fax: (202) 364-0498
E-mail: icwa@icwa.org
Web site: www.icwa.org