

4.2 **The independent music scene and its importance in tensioning hegemonic musical knowledge: the case of the independent experimental music scene in São Paulo**

Natália Fontana Francischini¹

× **Abstract**

In this article, I discuss how the independent experimental music scene in São Paulo is organized and the way in which such organization enables scene to resist the obstacles imposed by social isolation. I make a brief comparison between the moment before the pandemic and the first year of social isolation (2020), giving an overview of the ‘migration’ of the scene to the virtual environment. I discuss this topic in my master’s thesis entitled ‘Aspects of the self-organization in the experimental music scene in São Paulo and some implications of social isolation’ (in progress). Focusing on the self-organization of this scene, I try to reflect on some practices such as ‘collaboration’ and ‘do-it-yourself’, as well as how these help participants to find autonomy in relation to their artistic productions. Methodologically inspired by autoethnography, I do it based on my experience as a participant and mainly based on interviews and the observation of venues and performance series.

Keywords: music scene, experimental music, self-organization, virtual environment, pandemic.

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1. Introduction

In this article, I discuss the collective and independent organization of the experimental music scene in São Paulo and the way in which such organization makes it possible to resist the setbacks imposed by the period of social isolation caused by the COVID-19 pandemic. I make a brief comparison between the moment before the pandemic and the first year of isolation (2020), giving an overview of the ‘migration’ of this scene to the virtual environment.

The experimental music scene in São Paulo mixes up many practices and people from different cultural backgrounds. Under the name ‘experimental’, it is possible to go through different artistic practices that find a common place in the interest in experimentation – a process that assumes a leading role² – and through

1. School of Communications and Arts, University of São Paulo, Brazil. E-mail: natalia.francischini@usp.br

2. When I say that experimentalism plays a leading role in the practices of this scene, I search for a way to differentiate it from other musical scenes, since experimentalism is something intrinsic to arts and, of course, to other musical scenes. However, the scene I am referring to is much closer, for example, to electronic music and freejazz scenes than to funk music from São Paulo. In the aforementioned ‘experimental music scene’, the practice and idea of experimentalism has a central role, the interest in opening a ‘final result’ of the music is generally superior to the search for a previously determined piece of music. This does not mean, however, that the composition is not present, quite the contrary.

the form of collective organization with a tendency to collaboration. It's as if this experimental music scene were composed by fragments from other scenes (such as noise, improvisation, electronics, among others³). This way, it is possible to see artists moving between these different repertoires and getting involved with different musical projects.

2. Some independent venues

Before the pandemic, there was a diversity of venues where much of this artistic production took place. These places were managed, mostly, by collectives of artists, dedicated exclusively (or not) to the production of the experimental music. They functioned independently, seeking autonomy from an institutionalized and commercial cultural structure. In my master's research, I particularly studied three of these independent venues: *Ibrasotope Música Experimental*, *AUTA* and *Estúdio Mitra*. Each one had particularities in relation to the material conditions that made them exist as 'independent cultural centers', as well as their form of internal organization and their objectives in relation to the scene they composed. Below, I briefly tell you about each of them:

Ibrasotope was an important venue exclusively dedicated to experimental production in the city of São Paulo and it functioned as a kind of cultural center and housing. The place had many residents and different managers throughout its existence, being always organized by a small group of people. According to the founders Henrique Iwao and Mário Del Nunzio, the desire in such challenging work arises from experiences they went through during the years they attended the undergraduate composition, school, alongside other colleagues with whom they sought to create spaces for coexistence, debate and production, "something rare in the academic environment" at that time (Iwao & del Nunzio, 2009, p. 6). Ibrasotope aimed to foster an experimental music scene in which it was possible to establish exchanges, promote meetings and make such repertoire accessible 'outside the academy'. The program was organized in different series of activities, firstly dedicated to electro-acoustic music and, later, it promoted a varied circuit of practices linked to the term 'experimental music'. With the arrival of Natacha Maurer, in 2010, both the organization and the musical practices diversified. The curatorship was open to any artists who were interested in performing there. And, in this sense, the production work was related to 'scheduling' dates and marketing. There was an interest in making the venue as accessible as possible, fostering audiences by paying offering a pay what you can tickets, selling affordable drinks and establishing a relaxing 'party' atmosphere. Ibrasotope was basically maintained by dividing the expenses among the residents. This venue was responsible for a great dynamization of the experimental music in the city, attracting artists from all over the country, as well as foreign ones. They also promoted important festivals such as the International International Festival of Experimental Music (2015-2017). After 10 years, Ibrasotope ended its activities in 2017, mainly due to the growing difficulties brought by the conservative shift in Brazilian politics, which directly affected the culture and the permanence of these independent venues, given the few resources they have.

AUTA was inaugurated in September of 2019, created by the artists Carla Boregas, Anelena Toku and Juliana Rodriguez. The venue was an important meeting point for the punk, electronic and experimental scenes. In an interview I carried out with Carla Boregas in February 2021, the artist reported that AUTA materialized an old desire to manage a 'bar' in which it was possible to present different artistic activities, stimulate 'exchanges', 'reception' and 'blend' of people, with a good infrastructure, without a very onerous maintenance cost and without necessarily focusing on a specific musical aspect (Boregas, 2021). Carla Boregas also reports that the artists performed a division of tasks, but that they always 'did everything' like managing the events, working on sound techniques during the presentations, organizing and cleaning the venue after the events. According to the artist, it was the resources acquired from the sales that paid the establishment's rent. However, at least once a month it was necessary to hold a collaborative event to ensure the maintenance of the space and the payment of basic expenses: all the amount collected, instead of being distributed between the house and the artists, was donated to the venue. Even in a short time of existence, AUTA held dozens of events, promoted several workshops, in which artists from the most diverse segments circulated. Unfortunately, with the arrival of the COVID-19 pandemic, AUTA ended its activities in 2020, as they were unable to hold physical meetings and guarantee the maintenance of the establishment.

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3. It is remarkable, as mentioned in the previous note, the presence of artists who not only circulate in the experimental scene, but also circulate in other musical scenes, such as the punk, grind, jazz, electronica, among others. To learn more about this, see: "São Paulo Underground: Creativity, Collaboration, and Cultural Production in a Multi-Stylestic Experimental Music Scene", by James McNally (2019).

Estudio Mitra, in turn, started functioning as an ordinary studio, offering recording and production services. It is an old and 'informal' project by the artist Igor Souza and his partners. To the extent that Souza – the main articulator of the space – saw the possibility of becoming a sound technician, he began to dedicate himself to the area. It didn't take long for the venue to open up for performance nights, in the year 2018. In an interview given to me in October 2020, Souza said that the initial idea was to "bring people together to talk, listen to music, play and form a collaborative network". Despite being managed only by him, the studio's events have always featured collaborative productions, together with friends and partners of the *Estudio*. The tasks division at the events was always quite informal, since there was no basic structure as 'cash register' and 'bar counter', as it is common in places dedicated to musical performances. *Estudio Mitra*, as well as most of the independent spots dedicated to the experimental music, has always organized the events according to its own resources, dividing all costs between the organizers. The technical services provided by the studio was also used to guarantee the events. Igor Souza says that part of the drinks and food sales were used to "pay those who worked at the event, even if it only covered transportation or their own beer". (Souza, 2020, n/p). According to the artist, there was a project to invest on the physical expansion of the studio space, aiming larger events and renting some of his rooms for rehearsals and filming. However, "unfortunately, the [COVID-19] pandemic and fascism aborted this project" (Souza, 2020, n/p). Venue activities are suspended indefinitely.

2.1. Convergences

Although they have their own history and link with the experimental music scene, there are several converging points between these venues and what concerns both the way they are organized and the principles they share. It is possible to point out some of the characteristics that seem fundamental to me about its mode of organization: the presence of a certain informality in carrying out its activities, the practice/ethics of do-it-yourself (Del Nunzio, 2017; McNally, 2019), an independent and self-managed organization, in addition to a predisposition to an action that always aims to contemplate the scene as a community (Del Nunzio, 2017).

I believe that these aspects are objectively present for two reasons that, in a way, complement each other. The first of these are the socio-political-economic conditions⁴ in Brazil (and, of course, those specific to the city of São Paulo) and the way in which their power is able to interfere in the artistic activity present in the country, both regarding to the establishment of a field that is institutional (a market that absorbs workers, an industry, the role of the State in this environment, the way in which they are established, etc.), and regarding to the value of the artistic activity for Brazilian society (how the figure of the artist is valued, the presence of differentiations between 'professional' or 'amateur' artistn/practices, the discourses that classify and legitimize these categories, among others). The second is more related to subjective aspects of the participants and which, in my view, are common to some musical scenes, such as, for example: the sharing of ethical-political principles and the production of an individual meaning through identification with a specific artistic community or practice; the search for alternative ways of existing in the world, producing art and articulating collectively.

Material and ethical conditions allied to the political positioning of these artists in the field in which they work (artistic practices that identify with an 'underground' or something outside an official/legitimate art) feed the dynamics present in this scene, which range from practical and objective management activities of a given venue/collective, to the way in which social bonds are established, in addition to the relationship that these artists have with their own artistic productions. Evidently, the aforementioned conditions also suffer the interference of the operation of these artists in the scene, since they also have the power to transform these conditions - which can occur in different ways, for example, through the occupation of spaces in the city, the own strengthening and expansion of the scene and the link between its participants, the projection of artists in other artistic spaces (including institutional and commercial) and political activism.

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4. When I use the broad term "socio-political-economic conditions" I am also referring to the complex web that determines the functioning of the artistic system in the country, which is extremely elite and joins the neoliberal political structure built in Brazil in recent decades.

2.2. Self-organization and place

Forms of independent self-organization always bring difficulties, since they are modes of cultural and social articulation that seek to propose alternative modes of existence to homogenizing artistic and cultural systems and thoughts. In São Paulo, these difficulties, in large part, may be related to the intrinsic characteristics of the city, such as its high cost of living and its excluding geography. Although the 'Brazilian'⁵ experimental music scene works under similar conditions, we cannot ignore the considerable differences between each state in the country, both in terms of access to public policies and federal investment, and in terms of their cultural singularities. When we talk about a scene like the one in São Paulo, we are objectively talking about an experimental scene taking place in one of the most populous cities in the country, one that receives the greatest financial resources, in addition to having a large circulation and diversity of people. The main venues are rarely established in peripheral areas, although we know that an important part of its regular participants reside in these regions. The fact that these spots are established in the central region of the city (or in neighborhoods where access to it is facilitated) makes the physical access by residents of non-central regions more complex. Thus, the movement of people through this scene turns out to be somewhat exclusive. Despite this, despite their limitations, these venues and collectives strive to make their artistic production circulate and become accessible, since this scene seeks, as mentioned, to establish other modes of existence, artistic and political articulation.

As we have seen briefly, the venues Ibrasotope Música Experimental, AUTA and Estúdio Mitra had in common the desire to make this experimental musical production viable, either by organizing and carrying out a program of concerts and festivals, or by offering workshops and discussion meetings. Everyone was concerned with 'democratizing' such production, holding events with free or accessible entry. We can observe this desire to spread the practice of experimental music, as well as the intention to create a scene in a magazine published by Ibrasotope, after its first years of operation, in 2009:

**Our starting point is the perception that there is a musical production that needs to be presented, enjoyed and debated, and that these practices need to occur regularly so that the body of interested parties can grow and solidify. In addition, the project points to the constitution of a Brazilian circuit of experimental music, in which musicians from different locations can present their work in other cities, to other audiences, making this music circulate and generating different developments (Iwao & del Nunzio, 2009, p. 5)*

None of the projects studied here received any kind of institutional financial support, except when they applied to public sponsorships to hold some events – something more occasional than recurrent. Basic maintenance costs have always been guaranteed by the sale of drinks in informal 'bar services' established at the venues on the days of presentations, or by dividing the rent and bills between the space's residents (in the case of Ibrasotope) or articulators of the collective (such as AUTA and Mitra).

In one way or another, these spaces always sought to avoid onerous bureaucratic requirements, for example, taking advantage of associations with other members of the collective that could allocate the project on properties belonging to family members or acquaintances (such as Ibrasotope and Estúdio Mitra) or avoiding situations such as signing a rental contract (in the case of AUTA):

**We already came to the issue that it was not easy to maintain and we were experimenting. For us to be able to get rid of it [from AUTA], taking out the money invested in the equipment, it was an easy scheme. [...] When the pandemic came, 'boom': in one day, we made all the moves and it was over. It was really a 'temporary autonomous zone'. (Carla Boregas, during an interview on February 16, 2021, n/p)*

It is possible to affirm that these undertakings were made possible by the strong presence of a do-it-yourself attitude, since such collectives started their activities informally, without prior knowledge of how to manage a cultural venue or produce a musical event, no interest in 'institutionalizing' and 'professionalizing' their

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5. I use this term with care as it is very complex to speak of an 'experimental Brazilian music scene'. Generally, the reference that one has to an 'identity' of experimental music performed in Brazil is that located in the southeast of the country, especially in the states of São Paulo and Rio de Janeiro. Reducing the production of Brazilian experimental music to just this region is to erase and exclude very important productions carried out in a country as vast and multicultural as Brazil. Therefore, I speak of 'Brazilian' only in relation to the possible similarities that may exist between the different experimental scenes present in the country.

activities. They are venues organized by artists who had the desire to find ways to be able to exercise their artistic productions freely, without meeting the demands of institutionalized musical environments and/or linked to a mainstream, to find other artists with the same interests, proposing other forms of relationship in the community.

A few years before the pandemic, the political and economic context in Brazil changed, especially after the impeachment of President Dilma Roussef in 2015. This event can be considered a watershed in Brazilian democracy, as it was a result (and also contributed to the aggravation) of a conservative shift in the country. The rising fascism, together with extremely neoliberal economic policies, made the life of certain social sectors precarious. When it comes to the artistic field, several political persecutions, as well as cuts in public services, combined with the demoralization of the artistic class by conservatives, resulted in the weakening of independent articulations such as that of the experimental music scene in São Paulo. Thus, right before the health crisis, the venues as well as its participants, were already having difficulties to continue with their projects.

3. The pandemic and virtuality

As in any artistic field in Brazil, the pandemic has complicated the performance of the experimental music scene. Since March of 2020 (when the pandemic forced us to establish the first attempts to lockdown in the country), live presentations and face-to-face meetings have been suspended, the difficulty of subsistence through artistic activity has worsened, as well as the bankruptcy of important concert houses. For a scene that finds its form and strength associated with its place (Bennett & Rodgers, 2016) and the encounters established in the urban space, the pandemic meant a considerable disruption of these bonds and relationships, which were of enormous importance for its functioning dynamics, exchanges knowledge and artistic production. As mentioned, Ibrasotope had already ended its activities in 2017, largely because of the difficulties of acting in the cultural field as an independent collective. AUTA, on the other hand, was forced to close its activities in the first months of the pandemic, handing over the leased place to its owner. Not only AUTA but also other venues that I did not focus on in this research had to cease their activities because they were unable to afford to maintain their basic costs during the quarantine periods. The difficulties in keeping important venues active, as well as the material capacity of the participants to continue producing, predates the health crisis. According to Gabriela Nobre, from Música Insólita label, the pandemic only intensified problems that already existed:

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the pandemic threw a shovel of lime in venues that were already struggling hard to survive, essential places, concert halls essential to the functioning of the scene. [...] The places that were closing, after all, why did they close? What was already a problem? What is exposed by the pandemic?
(Gabriela Nobre, during an interview held by me, on December 18, 2020, n/p)

That is a fact the pandemic did not cause the venues to close, but it aggravated existing difficulties that these collectives had as proposals for independent and underground articulation. Despite this, the experimental scene migrated more intensely to social networks (which were previously used for communication and dissemination of events). Early on, it was possible to notice a certain hyperproductivity, in addition to the emergence of relatively new situations in the scene: many live sessions transmitted by different artists (which consisted of conversations, interviews and presentations); some labels dealing with high demand from artists looking to release albums produced during isolation; series of online performances and festivals took place;

discussions arose around performing improvisations through streaming, as well as technical difficulties with the available platforms, the latency of audio and video transmission, the oscillation of connections; there was a certain shift from productions to video through video art and video performances; among other dozens of activities that we were able to follow. Evidently, in the midst of all this, there were those who did not have the mental conditions to produce absolutely anything, or did not want to adapt their work to the available media, or who were just looking for ways to readjust to daily life – staying at home or working outside of it.

It is important to highlight the activity that some groups have been establishing during the pandemic, via social networks. An example that I followed closely is the *Frestas Telúricas* collective. This collective took shape from the organization of an online live event with the same name, around May 2020. Some artists from different states of the country came together to organize this endeavor, organizing themselves informally through a Whatsapp's group. The initiative reverberated positively and several other artists in the scene proposed both to perform at online events and to organize the group. These events have been broadcast on the Youtube platform, in monthly editions, lasting about three consecutive days. Video-performances, improvisation, recorded show and video art are transmitted by streaming. For many months, *Frestas Telúricas* had the collaboration of a few dozen artists who gained prominence at some round tables on experimental music and sound art festivals in Brazil, such as the CHIII Festival of Creative Music and the *Festival Novas Frequências*. These festivals, in turn, also encouraged the scene during the pandemic, carrying out unique editions entirely online, also proposing new formats of presentations through audiovisual works, organizing debates and seminars about the current conditions of the scene functioning via social networks.

As it is common in music scenes⁶, virtual performances were already part of the scene, as social networks have always been an important means of connection between artists from different parts of the country, in addition to the main means of disseminating performances and releasing records. However, the pandemic demonstrated that, although the experience of live encounters and physical venues cannot be replaced, social networks have always played a fundamental role, perhaps more fundamental than imagined: as for many other areas of society, access to the internet and technologies was what made it possible to maintain many activities that had to be suspended in “live” social living spaces.

4. Some first thoughts

It is natural that venues that were previously maintained with some difficulty through the self-organization of collectives or that depended on the consumption of services, quickly succumbed to the period of isolation in quarantine. There will be no other alternative than the willingness of the collectives to raise other places when it is appropriate. Until then, it is essential not to lose sight of the importance of self-organization aimed by the collective, since this has been one of the most essential pillars for the existence of this scene. However, in order to overcome the problems that existed before social isolation (such as the difficulty of keeping venues and independent experimental productions), perhaps this scene still needs greater political articulation, so as not to be exhausted by the difficulties imposed by more mainstream cultural structures and to continue their independent venues and activities.

The obstacles in holding physical events, in a way, keeps in suspension several important social dynamics, which are established by the meetings that used to take place in concert halls and venues where experimental productions used to be hosted. On the other hand, the existence of the virtual environment guarantees the continuation of pre-established links and, after all, allows the scene to keep up with some encounters, even if it is in other formats. At the same time, as we see the online festivals such as *Frestas Telúricas*, the expansion of isolated links beyond physical and geographic borders is encouraged, making artists who live in distant states start to create partnerships, organize festivals together and contribute so that the scenes of each state are known and active. However, these interstate meetings were not impossible before the pandemic, although the physical and geographic distances of a country like Brazil cannot be ignored.

The intense performance in the virtual environment during the pandemic highlights the articulate and adaptive character of this experimental music scene. What makes this continuity possible is not only the mode of collective organization that seeks independence from institutional means, but also the formation of

6. I allude to the proposition of researchers Bennett and Peterson about musical scenes as not only physical and 'trans-local' spaces where musical communities exist, but which also exist in virtual spaces, such as the internet and social networks.

a network of connections between artists through the internet that already existed previously.

Perhaps one of the most crucial points of comparison between the 'before the pandemic' and the current situation is, however, something that did not change with the pandemic, but only got worse: social disparities. The fact that the scene (or the part that we can observe) manages to maintain part of its activities on social networks, even though it needs to adapt to new media, brings with it evidence of its racial and social class composition. Those who are financially more structured, who have more access to internet, a computer to communicate and edit works, a camera to record performances, or even access to musical instruments are the artists who, in general, continue producing during the pandemic. Although many artists in the scene make use of precisely 'hacking' electronic devices now obsolete, and the presence of 'peripheral'⁷ artists is evident, this scene still needs to strive to be more inclusive, especially during a global health crisis that makes the even more restricted access and circulation. Anyway, this scene is still struggling to continue after the pandemic, given the material conditions of most of its participants, so a lot of work has to be done to rebuild and regain spaces.

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7. I use the term 'peripheralized' in the sense of researcher GG Albuquerque (2018), in which his reflection on two aspects is present: 1) the recognition that terms such as 'peripheral culture' or 'peripheral artist' may incur the risk of to relegate such artists and productions to a rigid place separate from all the rest of general culture; 2) the reaffirmation of the peripheral place as a power that produces discourses and culture, different from non-peripheral ones.