From Mail Art to Telepresence: Communication at a Distance in the Works of Paulo Bruscky and Eduardo Kac

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Networks have no centers, only nodes. Much of the experimental art of the 1970s and 1980s developed in points of intersection, cultural hubs, distributed around the world. This article examines one of those hubs, located in Brazil, through the early works of artists Paulo Bruscky and Eduardo Kac. Performing outside traditional art institutions and practices, Bruscky and Kac used systems of circulation and electronic networks to activate public spaces. Their work forged complex relations between place and space and transformed art and life through cultural activism. During this period, both artists approached art without regard for national borders or the categorical boundaries of traditional media. With a shared consciousness of art as an ideological system constituted and validated in large part by official institutions—the studio, art market, museum, gallery, art criticism, art history—Bruscky and Kac eschewed traditional venues and objects, opting instead, from the beginning of their careers, to invent new ones.

This chapter discusses the artists’ early works in relation to the political climate in which they operated. Born a generation apart—Bruscky in 1949, and Kac in 1962—their works from the 1970s and 1980s, respectively, marked the beginnings of their careers and contributed to the aesthetics of remote action and interaction. Although 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 (1980–1988). Based in Chicago since 1989, Kac has emerged in the subsequent fifteen years having the Internet and the international art scene as his natural environment. From 1968 to the late 1980s, Brazil was marked by a deprivation of public freedoms imposed by the military dictatorship, first installed with a coup in 1964. Bruscky and Kac have engaged with art at significant turning points in the Brazilian political-cultural context. Bruscky’s work responded to the political repression of the early 1970s; Kac’s opened new spaces during the tentative beginnings of political tolerance in the late 1970s.

Bruscky’s work is undergoing its first wave of national recognition.1 Kac’s work, first acknowledged internationally, along with a vibrant and influential reputation, enjoys growing recognition in Brazil.2 Kac was part of the much-celebrated “Geração 80” (the 1980s generation) in Brazil.3 Contrary to his painter colleagues, whose work enjoyed early critical acclaim as well as national and international market success, Kac’s production from the same period took much longer to even be accepted as art. Only in the recent increasingly pluralistic art scene have the accomplishments of both artists
begun to receive deserved recognition. The reductive critical view espoused by most Brazilian art critics and art historians that casts the 1980s in terms of neoexpressionist painting needs revision. Bruscky’s and Kac’s early works are among the most complex and critical legacies of the 1970s and 1980s, in any node of the global cultural network.

**Paulo Bruscky’s Aesthetics of Circulation and Reproduction**

One of Brazil’s darkest periods of state political oppression began in 1968 and extended through the 1970s. During those years, making art, and especially experimental art, in Brazil was a difficult and dangerous proposition. Nevertheless, artists continued to resist authoritarian structures by pushing the boundaries of experimentation and the limits of public freedom. They often chose to circulate their works outside official artistic institutions, perceived by many as being in agreement with the oppressive governmental regime. Many artists, such as Hélio Oiticica and Lygia Clark, chose to spend most of the seventies in exile, continuing to emphasize the participatory, sensorial explorations they had embraced in the 1960s. In 1970 in Rio de Janeiro, Cildo Meireles printed the message *Yankees Go Home* on Coca-Cola bottles—a symbol of American imperialism—and stamped the question *Quem Matou Herzog?* (Who Killed Herzog?) on Cruzeiro notes, returning both bottles and currency to circulation. These works were part of Meireles’s series *Insertion into Ideological Circuits*, which employed systems of currency and commodity circulation and distribution to carry subversive political messages. In these works, the scale of the intervention was not the point (the message on a Coke bottle can be seen as being like a message in a bottle thrown into the sea), but the performance of an act designed to “give voice to the void,” as art critic Paulo Herkenhoff has pointed out.

In Recife, on Brazil’s northeast coast, Bruscky found in the Mail Art movement an alternative venue for art making, participating in shared networks of ideas and gestures of resistance that linked national and international artists. The Mail Art movement bypassed the market of artistic commodities, as well as the salons and biennials that treated art exhibitions like beauty pageants. Bruscky’s work engaged with Fluxus’s concepts of fusion of art and life. His interest in processes of circulation, reproduction, and distribution yielded performances and interventions that may not always have looked like “art,” or even been counted as “art,” but that without doubt generated a new thinking that traditional art practices could not articulate.
Mail Art: To and from Recife

Over the last three decades, Bruscky’s work has taken many forms and employed various materials, sites, and aesthetic strategies. For him, the great network started with Mail Art in the 1960s. Despite the earlier pioneer examples—from Stephane Mallarmé’s poem-addresses on envelopes to Marcel Duchamp’s postcards—only in 1960, with Fluxus artists, and in 1962 with Ray Johnson, according to Bruscky, did the international Mail Art movement begin to fully employ the mail system as medium. Mail Art continued to develop throughout the 1970s, connecting Latin American artists not only with one another, but with artists from the Gutai group in Japan and Fluxus artists in the United States and Europe. Bruscky correspondents among artists included Johnson, Ken Friedman (with whom he performed in New York), and Dick Higgins, among others.

Bruscky initially became involved with the Mail Art movement in 1973, not only as a participant, but also as a promoter, organizing international Mail Art exhibits in Recife in 1975 and 1976. Bruscky’s archives contain fifteen thousand mail art works and are today an important source of documentation of the movement. The First International Mail Art Exhibit in Brazil, organized by Bruscky and Ypiranga Filho in 1975 in Recife’s central post office, was closed by censors minutes after its opening (many Latin American participants included messages denouncing state violence and censorship). Brazil’s Second International Mail Art Exhibit in 1976, organized by Bruscky and Daniel Santiago, and again sponsored by the central post office, showcased three thousand works from twenty-one countries. This exhibition was also closed by the police immediately after opening. It was seen only by a few dozen people. Bruscky and Santiago were dragged off to prison by the federal police and detained incommunicado for ten days. The majority of the works in the show were returned to the artists by the police after thirty days; many were damaged, and others were confiscated indefinitely as evidence.

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 as the theme of a solo show in a Recife art gallery, making public a threat 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, embracing art as “the experimental exercise of freedom.”

Communication at a Distance in the Works of Paulo Bruscky and Eduardo Kac
Communication at a distance, public participation and circulation—concepts central to the Mail Art movement—playfully deployed the rules and regulations of the international mail system, as in Brusky’s series *Sem Destino* (Without Destination and/or Destiny), 1975–1982. Brusky created artist stamps and messages on envelopes, such as *Hoje a Arte é esse Comunicado* (Today Art Is This Message), a sentence he often stamped on works; used postcards, telegrams, telex; and devised chain letters that produced multiple editions and often boomeranged back to the sender. Though supported by a few art institutions, Mail Art was resisted by others that in the early 1970s displayed no interest in conceptual experimentation. An example of the latter was the rejection by the jury of Brusky’s 1973 installation proposal, which he sent in the form of a telex to the 30th Salão Paranaense, a juried show in the south of Brazil. The missive proposed the following three installations as his entry: the first, a formless pile of all the packing materials from the other artworks arranged in a corner of the exhibition space; the second, all the materials used by the museum cleaning staff (brooms, buckets, water, rags) hanging one meter above the floor; the third, a display over a chair of all the materials used in the installation of artworks (screws, nails, hammers, etc.), along with the title *Don’t Touch! These Objects Are Being Exhibited.*

Through Mail Art, Brusky promoted public happenings, along with encounters among strangers brought about by the correspondence network. An example was the happening Brusky created in 1977 for the Ricerche Inter/Media Centro Autogestito di Attivita Espressive in Ferrara, Italy. Titled *Re-Composição Postal* (Postal Recomposition), it promoted an encounter among twenty-seven of Ferrara’s citizens, who received by mail a section of a work divided by Brusky into twenty-seven parts to be reassembled by the recipients.

**Mental Space, Aural Space, Aero Space: The Sky Is the Limit**

While involved with Mail Art, Brusky simultaneously explored various performance, cinematic, aural, and electronic aesthetics. The multimedia he examined in the 1970s included reproductive technologies (electrography, blueprinting, and fax), along with experimental film and video. In 1970, while working as a hospital administrator, Brusky developed sound poems based on patients’ utterances, moans, and screams and created a series of “drawings” using electrocardiogram, electroencephalogram, and X-ray machines. These graphic images were later incorporated in Mail Art envelopes.
and in various performances, including those with fax machines. Bruscky also created sound poems and compiled sound works by other artists, including John Cage, broadcasting them on a mainstream Recife radio station during the winter art festivals of 1978 and 1979.

Emphasizing connections among art, science, and technology, the artist quotes Santos Dumont, the Brazilian inventor and father of aviation, observing that “whatever one man imagines, others can achieve.” For Bruscky, it is important to place art in the realm of visionary scientific and technological inventions. This wider cultural horizon for artistic creation allowed him the freedom to pursue large-scale, open-ended projects, such as his 1974 proposition for the creation of artificial aurora borealis (to be produced by airplanes coloring cloud formations). Bruscky placed ads in newspapers to both document and circulate the project while looking for sponsors. These appeared in the Diário de Pernambuco (Recife), September 22, 1974; in the Jornal do Brasil (Rio de Janeiro) December 29, 1976; and in the Village Voice, May 25, 1982. The creation of artificial auroras was finally realized in 1992, not by Bruscky, but by the U.S. National Aeronautics and Space Administration (NASA) as part of environmental research. Approximately sixty artificial miniauroras were created by employing electron guns to fire rays at the atmosphere from the space shuttle Atlantis.

From Copy Art to Teleart: Duplication and Transmission, “Today Art Is This Message”

Bruscky’s exploration of reproductive technologies in the 1970s and early 1980s, from the use of stamps in Mail Art to photocopiers and fax machines, was rooted in his training as a photographer and his engagement with visual poetry. His performances with photocopiers shared with artists of the 1960s and 1970s an antirepresentational attitude toward art making, a desire to short-circuit the relations between original and copy, as well as the work’s inside/outside boundaries (figure 12.1). In this process of unhinging modes of production, representation, and circulation, he underscored how the context in which art operates frames and produces meaning. His criticism of originality in Xerox Art (the name photocopy art received in Brazil) ironically also explored the specificity of the medium, as Bruscky employed reductive and additive processes with a playful and poetic sensibility that expanded the limits and functions of the photocopier. He adjusted and altered the various parts of the machine to orchestrate series of images produced
with cinematic sensibility. He expanded the machine’s narrow depth of field by using mirrors and slide projections below and above the photocopier’s flat bed. From his prolific cycle of photocopy art, Bruscky made three Xerofilms, eventually part of his total experimental production of about thirty short films and videos. His Xerofilms were made with stop motion from thousands of Xerox copies produced in performances. For his second Xerofilm, for instance, Bruscky set fire to a photocopier, which documented its own de-

Figure 12.1 Paulo Bruscky in the act of his “Xeroxperformance” at the Universidade Católica de Pernambuco-Recife, 1980. This performance generated 1,350 photocopies that were filmed in stop motion, creating an experimental film animation under the same title.
struction in 25 seconds. For this body of work with photocopiers Bruscky, received a Guggenheim Fellowship in 1980 and spent the ensuing year working in New York and various cities in Europe.

Fax Art was another means of mediating distances, conflating the experience of Mail Art with that of Xerox Art while enabling new performances from afar. The first artistic fax transmission in Brazil was executed between Bruscky in Recife and Roberto Sandoval in São Paulo on October 31, 1980. The documentation of this first transmission was exhibited in Arte Novos Meios/Multimeios (New Media/Multimedia Art) at the Fundaccio Armando Alvares Penteado (FAAP) in São Paulo in 1985. In other fax performances Bruscky incorporated the 1970 electrocardiogram “drawings” of his brain waves and the graphic recorded heartbeats of his electrocardiograms in “direct transmissions of thought” he referred to as Cons-ciência da Arte (a title that doesn’t translate readily into English but refers to both art’s consciousness and science). For Bruscky, the machines registered his “direct drawing process” documenting in graphic form, his thoughts and feelings, brain and heart activity.

Bruscky has maintained an active presence in Recife’s cultural scene for more than three decades and continues to work as an artist, curator, and archivist. In works from the 1970s, he approached art with a new agency that is becoming increasingly important to a younger generation of artists. Whether working with the mail system or planning sky art interventions in which airplanes paint the clouds, his performances erupted into public spaces without the sanction of traditional institutions or curatorial authorities, continuously expanding the boundaries of art beyond its traditional frame and producing alternative sites for artistic creation and circulation. Bruscky worked both within and without art institutions, acting directly on the urban environment and often employing the media—such as newspapers, billboards, and radio stations—as venues, artistic media, and forms of documentation. His experimental practices reaffirm art’s critical and activist edge while becoming a lesson for critical theorists and independent curators in their rethinking of the boundaries between art making, critical writing, and curatorial practices. In his engagement from Mail Art to Fax Art, Bruscky’s work ignored physical distances, performing experimental actions that continuously locate art in the utopian space beyond the medium and beyond national and geographical boundaries.
Eduardo Kac’s Porno-Poetry Performances

In 1979, Brazil’s military government, under the pressure of public opinion, gave amnesty to all those involved in “political crimes.” Political exiles began to return home. As the tight censorship of the 1970s began to erode, so did the polarization between left and right characterized during the period by Che Guevara as the symbol of Latin American liberation versus Coca-Cola, equated with North American imperialism. According to Zuenir Ventura, during the ten years following the declaration of the AI-5 (Fifth Institutional Act, signed in 1968) that closed Congress and suspended all political and constitutional rights, approximately 500 films, 450 plays, 200 books, dozens of radio programs and more than 500 song lyrics, along with a dozen soap opera episodes, were censored.\(^\text{11}\)

The country’s slow return to democracy in the 1980s was accompanied by a shift in the focus of critical theory, from an essentialist Marxism centered on the problematic of class antagonism and commodity production, to a fresh interest in the formation of the subject—semiotics, psychoanalytical theory, and Foucauldian notions of power—followed by a new understanding of democracy as a task, rather than a gift to be given or taken.\(^\text{12}\) This self-critical examination of authoritarian and chauvinistic streaks among the intellectual, political, and urban middle class was marked by two best-selling books written by a journalist returning from a long exile in Sweden: Fernando Gabeira. His first book, *O Que É Isso Companheiro* (What Is This Comrade?) is the autobiographical story of a young intellectual who joins the urban guerrillas in Rio de Janeiro, planning and executing the kidnapping of the American ambassador Charles Elbrick, who is then exchanged for fifteen political prisoners. Not much later the police shot Gabeira in the back, and he was arrested while trying to flee. The wound healed in prison, and he was released in a similar exchange between political prisoners and a kidnapped ambassador, this time Germany’s. Gabeira went into exile in Algeria and then Sweden, returning to Brazil under the 1979 political amnesty. Gabeira has since renounced violence, remaining a political activist in the new democratic regime by holding a seat in Congress for the Green party.\(^\text{13}\)

Gabeira’s second book, *O Crepúsculo do Macho* (The Sunset of the Macho) exposed the inherent machismo and homophobia in the leftist movement and in Brazilian society.\(^\text{14}\)

At that time, as a young university student in Rio de Janeiro, Kac studied foreign languages, philosophy, and semiotics while working as an artist and
writer. The Poesia Pornô (Porno-Poetry) movement he founded in 1980 helped shape this political context by reclaiming the public space. Kac explained the movement: “The performances from 1980 to 82 had elements of scatology, surprise, humor, subversion, gags, and the mundane. In these poetic performances, the so-called vulgar or bad words become noble and positive. Scatological discourse and political discourse were one and the same and were manifested through cheerful orgiastic liberation.” Kac’s group performed in public places, such as the beach in Ipanema and the Cinelândia central square, the heart of Rio’s downtown bohemian life, where the group performed on Friday evenings for two years (1980–1982). With an emphasis on public participation, the porno-poets staged semantic displacements beginning with the word pornography. They transformed misogynist and homophobic labels into sexually liberating expressions in a process analogous to that undergone years later in the United States by the word nigger, as flaunted by rap culture, or the word dyke, as reclaimed by lesbians. Through humor, the group activated verbal transgressions that were first and foremost playful, as well as sexual, and ultimately political, in a polysemic celebration of life. They operated in the transgressive spirit of the poet Oswald de Andrade who in the 1920s proposed “the permanent transformation of taboo into totem.”

Kac called attention to the centrality of the body as a site for cultural inscription and transformation: “In my work in the early 1980s the body was everything. The body was the tool I used to question conventions, dogmas and taboos—patriarchy, religion, heterosexuality, politics, puritanism. The body became my writing medium ultimately.” In the artist’s next phase of development, the role of the body and its relationship to language would take an unprecedented turn.

**Holopoetry: Meaning in Flux and the Viewer in Movement**

Whereas Kac’s porno-poetry performances questioned political and cultural hegemonies, their language had straight ties to the political process of the early 1980s as well as to a long literary tradition. Kac’s interest in experimental poetry, along with his desire to create a new poetic language, led him to search for a new medium. He found it in holography, a medium that had never been explored for poetic expression. Kac was interested in holography’s time base potential, which enabled exploration of the inherent instability and flux he perceived in language: “In many of my holograms, time flows back and forth, in non-linear ways. The holographic medium allows
me to work with language floating in space and time, breaking down, melting and dissolving, and recombining itself to produce new meanings.”18 Suspending words in this immaterial space, Kac’s holographic poems offered a new field for poetic exploration in an international language. His engagement with holography marked a rupture with the porno-poetry movement and began his exploration of emerging technologies as artistic and epistemological practices with the potential of global reach. He coined the term holopoetry to describe the body of work he developed in this medium from 1983 to 1993.19 As he pushed the tradition of visual poetry beyond the page and beyond three-dimensional physical space, Kac explored holography as a four-dimensional medium, performing reading and writing as a time-based, open-ended process.

Containing words and letters in flux, Kac’s holopoems have their meanings created by the viewers’ movement and point of view, underscoring the direct relation between knowledge and positionality. As viewers read these images differently, depending on their relative position and movement in relation to the picture plane, these works suggest that location is an important category in signifying practices—in determining what we know, how, and why. Kac’s holopoems give form to the dynamics he sees in language and communication processes. For him, meaning is always a process of negotiation that happens through dialogue and shared communication: “Nothing exists until you claim it, until you create your own narrative, until you construct it.”20 This belief drives his emphasis on the interactive and dialogical practices that underlie his telecommunications and telepresence events, which take these explorations into the global network.21

Text in the Network and the Network as Medium: Telecommunications and Telepresence before the Web

Created and experienced digitally between 1985 and 1986, Kac’s first works on the electronic network were videotexts.22 He has stated that the early 1980s marked the culmination of the process of dematerialization of the art object and the beginning of the creation of immaterial (digital) art.23 For him, two landmark events created the cultural conditions for this shift: the popularization of the personal computer and the rise of the global electronic network. Kac’s early digital and telecommunication works emphasized process over product, giving form to communication exchanges that involved reciprocity and multidirectionality. Like his holopoems, Kac’s videotexts
continued to produce playful interrelations between the activities of writing and reading, addressing a range of different subjects.

Tesão (1985/1986) is a videotext animated poem shown on line and on site as part of the group exhibition Brasil High-Tech, realized in 1986 at the Galeria de Arte do Centro Empresarial Rio in Rio de Janeiro and organized by Kac and Flavio Ferraz (figure 12.2). Tesão is a declaration of love to Ruth, whom Kac later married. The three-word sentence that formed this videotext spoke of love in terms of desire. The colorful letters formed slowly on the monitor in a continuous line diagram. After all the letters of the first word had completed their graphic choreography, the screen became blank, and new letters started to form the second word in a similar symmetric, cinematic rhythm. A third word was made of solid and colorful letters that overlapped and filled the screen. The letters displayed on the screen in symmetric designs did not convey meaning as graphic forms in space, but as animations in time. As letters and words were formed in slow motion, viewers interpreted the fleeting configurations as changing meaning.

D/eu/s, from 1986, was a videotext animated poem, also part of the Brasil High-Tech exhibition. It was a black and white bar code with numbers and letters on the bottom that appeared in a small area centered on the screen (the proportion of the image to the screen was that of a bar code to a product). When viewers logged on they first saw a black screen, followed by a small, white, centered rectangle. Slowly, vertical bars descended inside the horizontal rectangle. At the bottom, viewers saw apparently random letters and numbers, reminding them of conventional bar codes. Upon close scrutiny the viewer noticed that the letters formed the word Deus (God). The spacing of the letters revealed eu (I) inside Deus. The numbers also were not random but indicated the date when the work was produced and uploaded to the Brazilian videotext network. The date also offered a second reading: 64/86 brackets the years between the military coup in 1964 and the height of public demand for the return of democratic elections in the Diretas Já (Democratic Elections Now) movement, which also coincided with the forward-looking exhibition Brasil High-Tech. The multiple meanings this short poem created—between humans and God, between God and the commodity labeling/identity to be read by scanners, and between the public demand for democracy and the utopian promises of the global network (still national at the time)—would be reexamined by Kac years later in his 1997 biotelematic performance Time Capsule and in his transgenic work Genesis from 1999.24
Figure 12.2  Eduardo Kac, Tesão, 1985/1986. Videotext (Minitel) digital animation shown online in the group exhibition Brasil HighTech (1986), a national videotext art gallery organized in Rio de Janeiro by Eduardo Kac and Flavio Ferraz and presented by Companhia Telefônica de São Paulo. Each column illustrates a sequence running from top to bottom.
Alongside videotexts, Kac’s early works with telecommunications, networks, and telepresence that preceded the Web further emphasized dialogic processes occurring in real time. He employed slow-scan TV (a kind of video phone), fax-TV hybrids, and fax performances in process-based works in which the process itself brought certain kinds of meanings to the work, such as a cinematic sense of progression, sequencing, and transformations that included interruptions, delays, and the artist’s interferences while images were still being received. These works from the mid- to the late 1980s include Conversion (slow-scan TV) and Retrato Suposto–Rosto Roto (Presumed Portrait–Foul Face) (fax/TV hybrid).25

Conversion was a slow-scan TV event realized at the Centro Cultural Três Rios in São Paulo on November 17, 1987. The slow-scan TV allowed the transmission and reception of sequential still video images over regular phone lines. The series of images that comprised the piece each took from eight to twelve seconds to form. Instead of considering each picture as a cinematic representation, Kac explored the live process of image formation. This was also the principle of Retrato Suposto–Rosto Roto (1988), created in collaboration with Mario Ramiro, who at one end of this fax conversation operated a fax machine from a live TV program in São Paulo, while Kac, at the other end, carried out a visual fax dialogue from his studio, thus connecting private and public realms (figure 12.3). (According to Kac, “the basis of this link was a real time operation utilizing the fax as a dialogic medium, in the context of a television broadcast, a unidirectional system of mass communication. The goal was not to create pictures remotely but to explore the interactive, improvisational quality of both personal and public telecommunications media simultaneously, integrating the apparently antagonist media into a single process.”26

In 1984, Kac started to create telepresence or remote-presence events. These telepresence works mobilized dislocations between place and space, that is, between the work’s literal site, such as a gallery installation, its symbolic or rhetorical place, such as the topos of Eden, and the virtual space of the electronic network. These experiences of dislocation between real and virtual spaces are more common than we think, Kac observed: “We have developed concepts about cultures that we have never seen, never experienced. In my telepresence installations, I’m making geographic displacements that reflect that.”27 This complex new geography in which telepresence art operates emphasizes real time over real space, enabling a remote perception of the world.
Simone Osthoff

Figure 12.3 Eduardo Kac and Mario Ramiro, *Retrato Suposto/Rosto Roto* (Presumed Portrait–Foul Face), 1988. Telecommunications event between Rio de Janeiro and São Paulo merging fax and live TV. Connecting the public medium of television with the private medium of the fax, this work created a system of feedback based on the continuous exchange and transformation of images. The images in the figure were extracted from the live broadcast realized in 1988.
from the point of view of the other, of the object—through the scale/lenses/eyes of the telerobot, “in a non-metaphysical out-of-body experience, if you will.”

Kac’s first telepresence project dates from 1984 and was never realized, as a result of countless technical obstacles. Titled Cyborg, the project involved three different Rio de Janeiro galleries—Galleria Cândido Mendes, Funarte, and Escola de Artes Visuais do Parque Lage—and the remote control of sculptural-robotic objects. In 1986 Kac realized his first telepresence work, RC Robot. He worked with radio-controlled telerobotics in the context of the exhibition Brasil High-Tech. The artist used a seven-foot-tall anthropomorphic robot as a host who conversed with exhibition visitors in real time (figure 12.4). The robot’s voice was that of a human being transmitted via radio. Exhibition visitors did not see the telerobot operator, who was telepresent in the robot’s body. Still in the context of the exhibition, the robot was used in a dialogical performance realized with Otavio Donasci, in which the robot interacted with Donasci’s videocreature (a human performer with a TV monitor for a head). Through the robotic body, a human (hidden away) improvised responses to the videocreature’s prerecorded utterances.

Between 1987 and 1988, still in Rio de Janeiro, Kac drew sketches for two small telerobots to be controlled by participants in two distant cities. The idea was to enable a participant in city A to control a telerobot in city B and vice versa. The ideas explored in these sketches would lay the groundwork for the Ornitorrinco Project, Kac’s name for the small telerobot he would create with Ed Bennett in Chicago in 1989 (Ornitorrinco in Portuguese means “platypus,” which as an egg-laying mammal is a hybrid animal). The Ornitorrinco Project was developed until 1996 and became increasingly more complex, as Kac employed telecommunications to mediate relations among people, animals, plants, and robots. In his telepresence events, process is produced by all the forces, types of use, programs, glitches, and actions taken by participants, in a web of relationships that unfolds in real time.

Kac’s emphasis on dialogue and two-way exchanges disregards essentialist identities while exposing the fragility and fluidity of meaning. His poetic explorations of signifying practices, geographic dislocations, and multi-positioned spectatorship examine processes of identity constitution and fragmentation. The activism of his early porno-poetry performances on the Ipanema beach informs the cultural and ethical responsibility that characterizes his critical attitude: “If we don’t question how technology affects our
Figure 12.4  Eduardo Kac, RC Robot, telepresence work presented at the exhibition Brasil High-Tech, Galeria de Arte do Centro Empresarial Rio, Rio de Janeiro, 1986. Remote participants interacted with gallery viewers through the body of the telerobot.
lives, if we don’t take charge, if we don’t use these technological media to raise questions about contemporary life, who is going to do it?”

Bruscky and Kac share this sense of responsibility in their engagement with art, which they have advanced primarily not as the production of physical objects, but rather as the examination of ideas, relationships, contexts, and consciousness. The live interventions they created in the 1970s and the 1980s were an integral part of the social, cultural, and political networks that give art meaning. During this period Bruscky and Kac sharpened the edge of artistic discourse by creating critical, humored, and performative cultural interventions—the very practice of freedom.

Notes
1. Paulo Bruscky’s work has recently been showcased in various Brazilian exhibitions, roundtable discussions, and important articles such as Ricardo Basbaum’s “O Artista Como Curador,” in Panorama da Arte Brasileira 2001 (São Paulo: Museu de Arte Moderna de São Paulo, 2001); and Cristina Freire, Poéticas de Processo (São Paulo: Iluminuras, 1999). A large retrospective exhibit of his work was held at the Observatório Cultural Malakoff in Recife in 2001. Bruscky’s videos were screened in 2002 in Recife (Fundação Joaquim Nabuco), Curitiba (Cinemateca de Curitiba), and Rio de Janeiro (Agora). The information about Bruscky’s work included in this chapter is based on an interview with the author on May 27, 2002, at Bruscky’s Torreão studio in Recife, Brazil.

2. Eduardo Kac continues to enjoy a thriving international career that, entering its third decade, has received attention from the international popular media for his transgenic GFP Bunny, inviting controversy and generating discussion in multiple arenas. Some of his less-known early works are being examined in this chapter for the first time. For a comprehensive bibliography and documentation on his career, see <http://www.ekac.org>.

3. This group of artists was showcased in an exhibition titled 2080 (featuring twenty artists of the eighties generation) at the Museu de Arte Moderna de São Paulo, January 24–April 5, 2003. Kac contributed to the show with Cro-Magnon, a billboard originally shown in Rio de Janeiro in 1984.

4. The year 1968 marks the beginning of an era of state terrorism in Brazil. On December 13 of that year, the military government issued the AI-5 (Fifth Institutional Act), signed by military President General Costa e Silva. The AI-5 closed Congress and suspended all political and constitutional rights, opening the way to
political persecution, torture, and censorship. Following their interruption by a military coup in 1964, presidential elections were not held again until 1989.


6. Vladimir Herzog was a São Paulo investigative journalist who was arrested by the security forces and later found hanging in his cell. The government stated that his death was “a suicide,” a claim few, if anyone, accepted. Most people believed he was tortured to death by the Brazilian police and government.


8. The forward-looking Brazilian art critic Mario Pedrosa used this expression in the 1960s to describe the experimental works of Oiticica, Clark, Lygia Pape, Antonio Manuel, and others. Rina Carvajal and Alma Ruiz, eds., *The Experimental Exercise of Freedom* (Los Angeles: MOCA, 1999).


10. Curated by Daisy Pecinini, this exhibit was one of the few that in the 1980s focused on emergent art engaged with technology. Among other artists, Bruscky participated with his three Xerofilms, in addition to his fax art documentation from the 1980s and a new fax transmission for the show. Kac exhibited three of his holopoems, “Holo/Olho,” from 1983, and “OCO” and “Zyx,” from 1985.


12. Judith Butler, Ernesto Laclau, and Slavoj Zizek, *Contingency, Hegemony, and Universalit*y (London: Verso, 2000). The authors discuss the false notion, developed since the 1980s, of an opposition between Marxist theory and Lacanian and deconstructive analysis of the formation of the subject.

Barreto in 1997. (Titled in the English version *Four Days in September*, it received an Oscar nomination.)


15. Eduardo Kac, in interview with the author, July 8, 1994, Chicago.


18. Ibid., 20.


21. Kac’s emphasis on the idea of dialogue is based in part on the philosopher Martin Buber’s (1878–1965) notion of relations of reciprocity and intersubjectivity between “I” and “Thou,” and relations of objectification between “I” and “It,” as well as in the Russian literary critic Mikhail Bakhtin’s (1895–1975) discussion of the dialogical function of literature and language.

22. Kac’s Web site <http://www.ekac.org> defines videotext as follows:

The videotext system allows users to log on with a remote terminal and access sequences of pages through regular phone lines. This videotext network was a precursor to today’s Internet and functioned very much like it, with sites containing information about countless subjects. It also allowed users to send messages to one another (email). Different countries, such as UK, France, Japan, Canada, USA and Brazil, implemented different versions of the videotext concept under their own names. The UK called it Prestel. The Brazilian system was dubbed Videotexto. In Canada it was known as Telidon. In the USA the network was named Videotex. Under the name “Minitel,” France implemented a comprehensive videotext network that was widely used throughout the 1980s. In 1984 Minitel terminals were distributed to subscribers free of charge, which helped to further popularize the network.
From 1983 to 1994 (the period of the Internet boom), use of the Minitel grew continuously. In 1995 there were 7 million Minitel terminals in France. Although most countries no longer use videotext, the medium is still employed in France. It is also possible to access the Minitel through the web.


25. Other related works not examined here are *Three City Link* (slow-scan TV), 1989; *Impromptu* (fax and slow-scan TV), 1990; *Interfaces* (slow-scan TV), 1990; *Elastic Fax I* (fax), 1991; *Elastic Fax II* (fax), 1994; and *Dialogical Drawing* (telecommunication sculpture) 1994.


28. Ibid., 22.

29. Ibid., 23.