

Alessandro Angelini

Favela in replica: iterations and itineraries of a miniature city

**Article (Accepted version)
(Refereed)**

Original citation: Angelini, Alessandro (2016) *Favela in replica: iterations and itineraries of a miniature city*. [The Journal of Latin American and Caribbean Anthropology](#) , 21 (1). pp. 39-60. ISSN 1935-4932
DOI: [10.1111/jlca.12174](https://doi.org/10.1111/jlca.12174)

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Available in LSE Research Online: May 2016

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Favela in Replica: Iterations and Itineraries of a Miniature City

As coisas têm peso, massa, volume, tamanho, tempo, forma, cor, posição, textura, duração, densidade, cheiro, valor, consistência, profundidade, contorno, temperatura, função, aparência, preço, destino, idade, sentido. As coisas não têm paz.

Things have weight, mass, volume, size, time, form, color, position, texture, duration, density, smell, value, consistency, depth, contour, temperature, function, appearance, price, destiny, age, meaning. Things do not have peace.

- Arnaldo Antunes, “as coisas”

On a typically sweltering January morning at the height of summer in Rio de Janeiro, a German television crew lumbered up the hillside *favela*, or squatter settlement. Kamal, a local youth, led the group through his community, which I call Morro do Saqualé. He was chatting with his artistic mentor Xavier, and his partner and manager Sofia. Kamal led up the winding footpaths and staircases snaking between terra-cotta brick houses, as the *gringos* plodded uphill, pausing to snap photos and sip water between belabored breaths. We turned off the main path up a side trail leading around a few more houses and into the surrounding forest. There, where a canopy of towering trees provided respite from the stifling heat, a curious structure entered into focus: an assemblage of painted bricks, ceramic tiles, concrete, wires, and myriad reused materials sprawled across the forest clearing. The visitors stood agape for a moment at the first sight of what appeared to be miniature city in marvelously vivid colors and meticulous details. Die cast toy cars, “cable cars” made of beer cans hanging from wires, and thousands of colorful totemic-like figurines populated the model. A hand-painted sign nailed to an enormous jackfruit tree greeted the visitors in English:

WELCOME TO MORRINHO, AN INCREDIBLE MODEL THAT REPLICATES THE REALITY DAILY LIFE OF THE FAVELAS. THE MORRINHO IS MADE OF PIECES OF BRICK AND OCCUPIES 300M².

One might relate this account in a different way, however. One might note that this was not Kamal's first turn guiding visitors through his community. He had been leading groups of tourists, artists, filmmakers, social scientists, and journalists for at least five years prior. He had recounted the origins of Morrinho, the play site he and his peers created and have maintained since 1997, on hundreds of occasions as a place where they enact a role-playing game that simulates urban life following the rules of their reality. They had produced videos displaying the idiosyncrasies of their game, and constructed replicas of their model city in international cultural festivals, to an expanding public. Summer was high season not only for foreign tourists in Rio but also for international media productions, and the city's favelas have served as a subject for innumerable stories about "the other side" of Brazilian society, or about the "reality" behind the image of a harmonious subtropical metropolis. Kamal had walked this path even more times, carrying materials to Morrinho, or going there to play or simply to take respite. He and his friends had chopped up tens of thousands of those terra cotta hollow clay tile bricks, colloquially—and derogatorily—known as Bahian bricks for their shoddy, unreliable quality. Morro do Saqualé is identified as a favela largely by the uniformity, and chaotic distribution, of the housing stock, built almost exclusively with those same *tijolos baianos*. The forest surrounding the site was not, as it were, "original": conservation projects had in fact regrown the terrestrial biome after sugar cane and coffee industry boom cycles devastated it (Dean 1995; Vianna 1993). In Saqualé even so-called nature has been remade over and over, and thus discloses histories of its own.

A twice-told tale. The main difference in this latter account is an attention to repetition, replication, reiteration, and reproduction. Morrinho is a territory within a territory. It is made up of the same physical materials as that which it mimics in miniature. It has taken on second and third lives through video productions and art installations that travel transnationally. Despite a preponderance of repeat performances, of visual resemblances, and of symbolic transpositions, there *is* something new under the Rio sun. Based on ethnographic work since 2007 with the Morrinho youth collective in their community in Rio as well as at exhibitions celebrating Brazilian national identity and culture, this article investigates how the favela circulates and becomes resignified as artwork. Observing how replication paradoxically produces difference, I draw upon works that point to how the act of copying does not simply condition hierarchies between purported originals and their replicas but also unsettles that very relationship. My aim, however, is to inflect longstanding debates over the aesthetics and politics of the urban periphery in the Brazilian cultural imaginary, as a way of addressing a perhaps naïve question: Why did the favela become an object of heightened fascination for turn-of-the-21st-century cultural producers? I bring special attention to what we may call geographies of iteration, or the spatial and social distribution of the power to replicate, as a means of investigating this question.

If the right to represent the city is open to all, that right is not equally valorized everywhere. Morrinho youth build with the same singular method, whether in their home community or abroad in foreign cities. With a *clack clack clack* of trowels, rock hammers and chisels, they chop thousands of hollow clay-tile bricks (their industry name) into *casinhas*, or “little houses,” which they paint with bright colors and stack one upon the other to create an improvised form. The negative spaces between *casinhas* become streets, staircases, and alleyways. These are laid down with concrete and sometimes adorned with lampposts, handrails,

and water ditches. The product of almost mechanical yet labor-intensive repetition, the resulting assemblage is a site-specific sculpture that resembles a miniature city. As this essay will demonstrate, if the original model, or *maquete*, consist of both the object-world of Rio de Janeiro as a built environment and the subjective experiences of working-class youth, then the replicas they have constructed for art exhibitions expands that multivalent set of relations. As I shall demonstrate, contemporary art worlds have embraced and promoted Morrinho variously as a testament to artistic self-determination, an emblem of developing-world urbanization, an authentic bearer of Brazilian national culture, and marker of marginality as cultural identity. How can one object—or rather, an object repeated—do so much work? That is to say, so much semiotic, affective, political work? As the Brazilian poet and composer Arnaldo Antunes might put it, Morrinho is a thing without peace.

Debates over iteration lead from the foundations of social science into disparate scholarly territories. The rubric of generative imitation derives particularly from the work of Gabriel Tarde (1903) who proposed a program of social analysis not from the perspective of the individual or the group but rather departing from the products, acts, and ideas that enframe those individuals or groups. Fundamentally, Tarde saw social relations and social organization as governed by a principle of propagation rather than static equilibrium. While these ideas were ultimately eclipsed by structuralist approach of his compatriot Émile Durkheim, Tarde has been resuscitated through the work of Gilles Deleuze (1995) and Bruno Latour (2002). Disavowing an appeal to the notion of an overarching, integrated, and stable realm of the *social* on which Durkheim's sociology stood, Tarde's laws of imitation were premised on the instability of meaning and agency that depended on local, material tensions (Candea 2010). Crucially, for Tarde, what constitutes the social is always in play and never given *a priori*.

A touchstone argument in Michael Taussig's *Mimesis and Alterity* (1993) links ethnographic accounts of wooden figurines in Cuna healing with Walter Benjamin's theses on the new sensorium in the age of the camera and cinema, as well as the history of anthropological positions on symbolic economy, fetishism, and magic. Here Taussig concludes that if the mimetic faculty is essentially "the nature culture uses to create second nature, the situation now is that this famous second nature is foundering and highly unstable" (Taussig 1993:252). Cultural historian Hillel Schwartz (1996) has traced a Western ambivalence toward the status of myriad fakes, replicas, and facsimiles. Philosopher Michael Boon (2011) has argued that copying is a fundamental condition of the human and of the universe. Marilyn Strathern (2012) has explored knowledge production as question of cross-disciplinary repetition and distinction, and as a way to remark on academic innovation and fragmentation. Gustavo Lins Ribeiro (2013) has highlighted the role of copying, and our contradictory attitudes toward imitation in three fields of human activity: in academic authorship, in the reproduction of culture, and in the historical development of capitalism. Alexander Dent (2012) has identified similar contradictions in political and ethical subject positions around piracy in Brazil. The common argument among these contributions concerns the observation that copying is integral to contemporary cultural and economic life, even as the act of copying itself, as well as its products, are perceived as debased forms. If Taussig in particular regards this state of affairs as indicative of a crisis at the heart of the Enlightenment civilizing project, then it is all the more understandable that a youth group reproduce in miniature their urban surroundings, the city being perhaps prime embodiment of that very second nature that always risks becoming volatile and illegible to itself. I take these investigations not merely as a call for further research into the underexamined world of repetition

and reiteration but more importantly as a critical engagement with this very cultural arrangement, pitting originals above copies, and its political, economic, and epistemological consequences.

Invited as artists to “reproduce what we have here [in our home community] over there” in art and culture exhibitions beyond their locality, Morrinho youth are asked to repeat themselves, and yet they cannot. How these passages through the world are articulated, and how they disclose broader social relations, forms the focus of this paper. The making and remaking of their *maquete* suggests that repetition produces difference as it reproduces sameness. Indeed, let us we perceive the traveling art-exhibition Morrinho(s) not as a facsimile but rather as a place-making and indeed world-making activity in dialectical tension with its surroundings. It is, in other words, a thing not only containing a geography of its own but also making new geographies. The project thereby begins to disrupt assumptions about the relationship between models and their purported referents, originals and replicas, play objects and material culture. It is a work that calls into question what the nature of creativity and authorship is, how artworks refer or evoke, what they are supposed to be *about*, and what they point to.

Points of departure

At age fourteen, Kamal and his younger brother Marcelinho, moved with their mother and father from the interior of Rio de Janeiro state to the edge of Morro do Saqualé in 1997. Struck by the stark contrast between rich and poor that characterize Rio’s landscape, the brothers began appropriating building tools and materials from their father, a mason, to represent their new surroundings. “My father wanted to put down tiles for the bathroom floor. We ended up taking the tiles and making little houses,” recounts Marcelinho. “The neighbors’ chickens kept tearing down our tile houses, so we started building with bricks (*tijolos*), to break up some bricks

and see how it looked. It was alright. We'd have to go down at one o'clock at night and take some up through the middle of the community. Sometimes people would hear and start shouting at us. 'Hey, those bricks are mine!' Well, they were, but they were broken, so..."¹ Kamal and Marcelinho were soon joined by a group of teenage peers—all male—who expanded this miniature Rio, each participant building his own portion of the model.

Building went hand-in-hand with playing. This structure served as *tableau vivant* to stage an open-ended role-playing game using thousands of inch-tall figurines, or *bonecos*, which participants manipulate and ventriloquize in squeaky falsetto voices. They dramatized everyday urban life through a panoply of characters including men and women, children and adults, shopkeepers, DJs, politicians, prostitutes, drug gang members, police officers, and so on. This game and the site itself became eventually known as Morrinho, or "Little Hill" (see figure 1).



Figure 1: At left, Kamal leads university art students on a visit to the Morrinho model *in situ* in December 2014. Photo by author.

Morrinho grew within a context of intensified state intervention in its young creators' lives, as a new policing apparatus and infrastructure upgrading projects were implemented in Morro do Saqualé.² Nearly 2,000 residents inhabit this forested slope in-between affluent districts of Rio, and in 1999 the community became one of the first targets of military police invasion and

¹ These statements are excerpted from an early documentary on Morrinho, "O pequeno e o grande [The Small and the Large]" (2008), directed by Fábio Gavião and Markão Oliveira.

² My Ph.D. dissertation, "Model Favela: Youth and Second Nature in Rio de Janeiro" (2013), focuses more centrally on the relations and disjunctures between Morrinho play and urban planning and police practices in the community of Saqualé.

occupation followed by a “blitz” of municipal agencies aimed at social uplift, a program championed by anthropologist and special public security consul Luiz Eduardo Soares (2000). News reports of the moment, as well as many residents, began to refer to this settlement as a “model community.” The scheme would collapse with Soares’s abrupt dismissal from office but later be revived and amplified as a city-wide strategy branded as favela “pacification.”³ Significantly then, Morrinho began to model life in Rio at a moment in which state was intent upon transforming Saqualé into a model for a new city.

In 2001, two documentary filmmakers partnered with Morrinho youth to create videos starring their bonecos and promote the project as an artwork. In successive years Morrinho has circulated as an art installation, beginning with appearances at a luxury shopping mall and an architecture exhibition in Rio. In these first public engagements, with the pressures of deadlines and outsider audiences, play became work, and the group soon began to refer to it as such. Arguments over display decisions frequently arose in the mounting stages of these exhibitions, while the youth were always unsure what monetary value to claim beyond material costs, as their *cachê*. The filmmakers founded Project Morrinho as an NGO in 2005 to promote audiovisual training for youth, tourism in the Saqualé community with Morrinho as a cultural anchor, social development programs, and Morrinho as a portable artwork. In the latter vision, the youth traveled as artists to cultural festivals and art expositions in Barcelona (2004), Paris (2005), Munich (2006), Venice (2007), São Paulo (2007), Vienna (2008), Berlin (2008), London (2010), Oslo (2010), Eindhoven (2011), Dili (2011), Bogotá (2011), and Queens, New York (2013). At

³ Pacifying Police Unit, or UPP, is a program inaugurated in 2008 by the Rio de Janeiro State Secretariat of Public Security that has aimed to install community police personnel in favelas. The scheme, which reached 38 territories in 2014, involves an announced raid by BOPE, the elite police operations battalion of Rio’s military police, to drive out the entrenched drug gang, followed by the introduction of a permanent community police force and offering of public services previously inaccessible to residents. The UPP program is preceded by other community policing projects, including Mutirão Pela Paz (“Collective Effort for Peace”) in Morro do Saqualé in 1999.

each of these destinations, a team of five to ten Morrinho youth reconstructed replicas of the original *in situ* model. Saqualé has, in the meantime, become a popular (and relatively safe) attraction for tourists, journalists, television and film production teams, musicians, curators, architects, and social scientists. As guides to their community and as artists of Morrinho exhibitions, these youth have reiterated the story of Morrinho to thousands of visitors. During a main period of fieldwork in Rio from 2008 to 2010, in London in 2010, as well as in Project Morrinho's video archive of their Venice Biennale exhibition, I observed these encounters and noted minute permutations in the narrative. These variations often corresponded to the intersubjective relation between Morrinho youth and outsiders. The basic storyline tells of play transformed into art, and of its creators' concomitant trajectory from naïve kids into self-conscious (and consciousness-raising) artists, from the trap of local circumstances to an ongoing world-making process.

The urban periphery in Brazilian art worlds

Morrinho emerged, in essence, as a way of looking out at the world at the precise historical moment when the world began looking at it, and Rio's favelas more generally, with renewed moral, aesthetic, and economic interest. In a city often overdetermined by tropes of leisure and promiscuity alongside inequality and armed violence, as well as by the paradigmatic urban problem of territorial segregation between favelas and the so-called formal city, or *asfalto*, Morrinho does not so much overturn such images of Rio as condense and aestheticize them. In fact, Morrinho revels in the very stereotypes of favelas that it is often purported to challenge, and in this sense it plays with expectations about what ought to be hidden and what ought to be revealed in representations of favela life. In my own experiences playing as my diminutive

boneco counterpart Alex, I encountered police brutality, crime-boss cruelty, dance-floor promiscuity, trickster thievery, TV news fecklessness, and many other figures and behaviors that made gameplay in the Morrinho world work because they collectively conformed to an attitude about how Rio functioned, in all its dysfunction.

The way Morrinho has engaged and been engaged by the contemporary art world further reveals a complex and unfolding relationship between social inequality and cultural production. The dynamic of the city and its margins has animated—and been reinforced by—a social scientific literature as well as artistic works too vast to adequately outline here but necessary to understand the cultural and political milieu in which Morrinho is noticed and taken up as art. Ángel Rama (1996) identified the historical formation of the Latin American city as the site of literate, rational society cast against its backward hinterlands. It is across this boundary, which spatializes the region's legacies of social exclusion, that a cultural imaginary of the periphery takes shape.

“Poetry exists in facts. The shacks of saffron and ochre in the green of the Favela, under cabralín blue, are aesthetic facts.” Oswald de Andrade opened his *Manifesto of Pau-Brasil Poetry* (1986 [1924]) with this ambiguous declaration. What indeed is an aesthetic fact? It is important to note how Andrade speaks to (and for) a world outside the Lettered City, because the politics of representation that emerges over the 20th century hinges especially on notions of an “external reality.” In Rio particularly, this framing figures into representations of favelas as a paradigmatic space of what Beatriz Jaguaribe calls a “realist encoding of the ‘real’” (2004:328). Her diagnostic rests on a proliferation of literary and cinematic images of the favela cast in a realist aesthetics, a mode of representation that, as Jaguaribe defines it, defamiliarizes lived experience in order to heighten perception toward expanded awareness. In the plastic arts,

Tarsila do Amaral's 1924 painting "Morro da Favela," depicts an idyllic and vibrant landscape of shacks on a hillside inhabited by dark-skinned people. She produced the work in the same year her partner Andrade published the *Manifesto*, which instigated the anthropophagic intellectual movement celebrating Brazilian culture as an ongoing process of mixture and hybridity.⁴

Rio's favelas have thus been long caught in a cultural logic wherein fostering the creativity of residents is framed as a vehicle for social development, with a broad range of methods and interests. In the 1960s Hélio Oiticica, a prominent figure in the Brazilian modernist avant-garde, created "wearable paintings" intended for residents of Morro da Mangueira, with whom he developed close friendships, to wear while dancing samba to explore the works' kinesthetic possibilities. The police killing of Cara de Cavalo, a close friend of Oiticica, led the artist to produce a tribute—and rebuke to the police logic of "a good bandit is a dead bandit"—in the form of an iconic flag displaying the man's splayed body and the message *SEJA MARGINAL, SEJA HERÓI* ("Be an outlaw, be a hero"). Paola Berenstein Jacques (2001) argues that what links Oiticica's projects delving into the architecture, bodily practices, and forms of sociability of Mangueira is the notion that favelas possess an aesthetic of their own. Later artist engagements with favelas would follow Oiticica's model of collaboration with residents: in 2008, French photographer and street artist JR pasted enormous photographs of local women's eyes on the walls of homes in Morro da Providência, Rio's oldest favela. This work, titled "Women are Heroes," intended to invest power in the gaze of the poor, black woman regularly rendered invisible in dominant depictions of favelas. Visitors to Vila Cruzeiro and Santa Marta communities will see brightly painted designs on building façades and stairways, the product of a project called Favela Painting led by two Dutch artists who claim "not just to beautify, but also

⁴ Andrade later published the "Anthropophagist (or Cannibalist) Manifesto" (1991 [1928]) further developing the project of a Brazilian national identity unified by the hybridity of its European, African, and indigenous influences.

to create a dialogue with their [*sic*] surroundings.”⁵ And plastic artist Vik Muniz, who in the film *Wasteland* (2010) documented his collaboration with waste pickers from Rio’s largest landfill to create artworks from collected materials, is constructing a children’s school for visual arts and technology in rapidly gentrifying Vidigal.

Morrinho itself has attracted the attention of cultural producers and critics. Alongside the partnership that led to the founding of its NGO, photographer Paula Trope collaborated with the youths to create a series of pinhole camera shots of themselves as well as of the model and its *bonecos*. They made, in other words, dynamically distorted portraits of the artists and of their art. Critics aligned this engagement between Trope and the *meninos do Morrinho* within the lineage of Oiticica’s experiments and on the forefront of movements in relational aesthetics and participatory art (Rangel 2011; Bourriaud 2002; Bishop 2012). Trope made Morrinho youth co-authors and co-owners of their photographic works, which she conceives of as a “dialogic game” mediating the technology of photography and the images it produces. Her methods, using lo-fi pinhole cameras and blurring the roles of producer and object, point to photography as a performative gesture, and as images as always in shifting relations with their contexts. “We cannot neglect the path of discourse and message through the world; by believing that they are enclosed within themselves, we risk compromising or losing their meanings... [T]he setting is always a mediator,” Trope explained to curator Gabriela Rangel in an interview (2006:278). I take her warning, against ignoring the passage of meanings artwork makes through the world, as an ethnographic inroads. We may take it on a deconstructionist faith in the instability of signs that the meaning and value of an object do indeed shift as it replicates and travels. From this

⁵ In a perhaps revealing grammatical slip, the description of Favela Painting on its website makes no mention of residents as such as being the benefactors and immediate public audience of their work. For the Santa Marta project, the site states that “25 local youth were trained and hired.” Source: Favela Painting. 2014. <URL: <http://www.favelapainting.com/bio>> Accessed on 4 September 2014.

brief historical sketch, we may highlight how artistic production in Brazil has hinged on cross-class collaboration, however fraught, and how projects have taken up the favela as a social and material milieu with which artists and artworks enter into dialogue.

Rio: models, artworks, and realities

Once they took in a panoramic visual survey of the *in situ* Morrinho model, the German TV crew began to set up camera angles, the host wiping sweat from his brow. Kamal continued chatting with his mentor Xavier, an artist who also builds miniature cities. Xavier works with cardboard and other recyclable materials in his studio in a nearby middle-class neighborhood. His manager Sofia engaged me in a conversation about the miniature before us, Morrinho:

It's what I was telling you: Here, I think the word '*maquete*' is inappropriate for this type of artistic work. In my conception a model is a mathematical reproduction in small scale of something that exists, did exist, or will exist. This here isn't. This is an artistic conception, an artistic vision by the boys of the reality that surrounds them, of what's around them. They use materials they find around here. Why do they work with brick? Probably because it is an abundant material around here. From the shacks [*barracos*] always being built here, there always was a surplus of bricks, and they went around getting them. And maybe you know this story better than I... So it's not a model. There is no preoccupation with an exact, mathematical reproduction of this vicinity [*entorno*]. It's rather an artistic representation, their vision, the spirit that they absorb from all their reality. That's why it's not a model. And that is why I don't like it when they call this work a model.

Sofia's categorical denial—that Morrinho must be considered not a model but art—struck me as particularly strident. Almost a century since Marcel Duchamp's readymades radically broadened what kind of objects could count as art, those involved the art world do not generally make such normative pronouncements. What then was at stake for Sofia in claiming that Morrinho was *art*, and not a model? It is important to note that the hand-painted placard described at the opening of this essay, as well as everyday conversations with Morrinho's stewards, indicated that they

themselves preferred to refer to their creation as *maquete*, that is, mock-up or model. Sofia's remarks manifested a telling ambiguity, as well: while her definition of a model suggested a mechanical reproduction in the quantitative language of Euclidean abstraction, her idea of the "boys" as creators does not conform to the Romantic notion of artistic genius. While she attributes "vision" to them, her simultaneous emphasis on how they "absorb" their surroundings" reveals a more complex understanding of their activity that echoes historical discourses about cultural production from the Brazilian periphery outlined above. The importance of showing one's reality seems both an imperative of how favela-based art is valorized as well as a limit to what constitutes creativity among the popular classes. Given the emphasis placed on—and neoliberal infrastructures devoted to—recognizing and promoting cultural production as a vehicle for social development and "community empowerment" in Rio's favelas (Neate and Platt 2006), the "realities" and "surroundings" of certain actors, especially poor, dark-skinned male favela youth, acquire new valences.

Morrinho youth straddle the discursive divide between model and art, but what are models, and what work do they do? In a functionalist sense, they may serve as facsimiles. A model Empire State Building, for example, is a miniature version of the life-size tower. It resembles its counterpart in appearance but not necessarily in scale or use value. It points to something, or a class of things, already existing in the world. Yet in other instances, a model may serve as an exemplar. If that mini-Empire State Building were constructed in the 1920s as prototype, its relationship to the life-size tower is such that the model anticipates a yet-to-exist object in the world. A model is seemingly taken to refer to an external referent, whether or not that referent exists in physical or ideational form: as an architect's blueprint points to a house or as a theory predicts economic processes, even if the house or the economic system exists

nowhere but in the imagination of those who believe in or accede to the power of those representations to realize them. Thus, if we think of a model as relational, we begin to identify the symbolic and material links between objects, how one thing refers to or stands in for another.

This discussion should recall another invocation of the same term within anthropological theory. In his “Religion as a Cultural System,” Clifford Geertz claimed that cultural patterns are doubly models *of* and *for* reality (1973:93–94). He distinguishes the former as symbolically parallel to a pre-established nonsymbolic system to render it apprehensible. The latter, meanwhile, works to shape the nonsymbolic system according to its own symbolic order. However, while Geertz was concerned with culture as model, I am here rather concerned with models being taken up as “culture.” Indeed, models are found in a broad range of human activity, from science to social theory to architecture to souvenirs and toys, but apparently not in the art world.

The “discovery” of Morrinho and framing as artwork and grassroots cultural project draws attention to social scientific modes of thinking about, and acting on, favelas that concern the relationship between the particular and the general, singularity and classification. Across a broad range of social scientific research, slippages in discussions of Rio between one favela and all favelas, or often “the favela” writ large, manifested this way of speaking, thinking, and acting about the city. While longstanding tropes of social exclusion and marginality continue to shape debates and social action, I found this habit of substitution—one for all, all for one—had also come to profoundly define encounters between favela residents, or expressions of so-called favela culture, and a range of outsiders. Anthony and Elizabeth Leeds produced a synthesis of community-based studies, *A sociologia do Brasil urbano* (1978), aimed at theorizing urban processes, and later Anthony Leeds would push the scalar scope of anthropological research

from isolated localities to urban systems—a move to produce studies “of the city” rather than “in the city,” as he put it (1994).

However, this problem lies in direct tension with ideas of place and community as the fundamental bearer of value and basis of politics (Harvey 1996; Logan and Molotch 1987). So, in our present case, Morrinho gains value not only as an expression, variably, standing in for “favela” or “Rio” or “Brazil” or “global urban youth culture” but also as a unique reflection of the particular story of its creators and their local community. These scales of meaning are not containers, as Matryoshka dolls, each nested within the next higher (cf. Tsing 2000). On a material level, this form of synecdoche hinges on repetition and reiteration, the making of one stand in for all of a category. This is not an account of an autochthonous form of play transformed into a transnationally circulating work of sculpture-performance art. Rather, trips to construct replica Morrinhos in art exhibitions abroad, as well as the seasonal rhythms of school semesters and tourist visits, would interrupt but not supplant the role-playing game at the *in situ* in Saqualé. In other words, the replicas have not superceded the original, but none of these objects have, nodding to Antunes once again, semiotic peace. Replication is not simply about repetition but also produces ambiguous reflexive effects. The circulation of representations do not necessarily disrupt absolute values of auratic authenticity (Benjamin 1968) but may also participate in the construction of a social order that hierarchizes originals and replicas.

The conception of artistic creativity as contingent on social milieu, as articulated by Sofia, is also a claim on its public-ness, which may reframe the Morrinho *maquete* as a form of communal property. John Collins has noted how cultural heritage projects in Salvador construct objects as property to be preserved as well as alienated, and thus points to a nefarious link between the institutions and legal regimes that create cultural properties and capitalist

accumulation by dispossession (Collins 2011; cf. Harvey 2003). *Morrinho*, as traveling art exhibition, to be discussed in the following section, becomes a technical reproduction that still relies on the labor of its creators. Like Benjamin's theory of reproducibility and mass media, *Morrinho* replicas afford collective experiences to new publics. But abroad, questions of authorship and the source of creative power come into play.

Venice: authorship in question

In 2007, Project *Morrinho* was invited to construct an installation at the Venice Biennale. Antônio, one of the ten youths who traveled to Italy, would later call it “the World Cup of art.” The Biennale's American curator, Robert Storr, had visited the original *maquete* in Rio and decided to include *Morrinho* as part of the program. Most of the exhibitions were organized into national pavilions, permanent structures built to house art representing different countries. Storr designated *Morrinho* to build a replica of their *maquete* in the Giardini, an open park area in front of the US pavilion (figure 25). In the Biennale catalog, titled *Think with the Senses, Feel with the Mind: Art in the Present Tense*, Project *Morrinho* appears on a two-page spread with text on the left and image on the right. The upper-right corner of every page shows a simple line-drawing of a world map. This design element is utilized to show where each art project comes from, a geographical index that mimics the plaques in front of zoo enclosures for endangered animal species. On the Project *Morrinho* page spread, the entire South American continent is colored solid red. Storr introduces *Morrinho* by means of estrangement:

Ten years ago a group of citizens from Rio de Janeiro banded together to construct a model community. Both the group and their project remain intact today.

These two sentences are true, but read out of context and absent crucial details they conjure up images of an ideal urban neighborhood when the reality—though remarkable in every way—is quite different from anything remotely suggesting Utopia. (2007: 230)

Note again the language of models, of ideals vis-à-vis reality. Storr spends much of the rest of the text providing more of the context he intentionally withheld at the beginning. He paints the social milieu out of which Morrinho emerges in grim tones: “boys... from the poorest of families... meagre houses... daily life in the favela which is regularly punctuated by actual violence... spontaneously forming slums that absorb uncontrolled migration... extreme congestion, poverty and lawlessness... a deepening shadow that is cast across the continent and over every city in the world whose economic polarities and anarchic sprawl follow the same pattern of development.” The description deploys the ready-made tropes of lack, precarity, and disorder that have historically characterized favelas in particular and informal settlements more generally (Valladares 2005; Gilbert 2007; Roy 2011).



Figure 2: Morrinho at the 2007 Venice Biennale. Inscription memorializing a former Morrinho participant killed by police appears at lower right. Photo by Project Morrinho.

Storr concludes with the redemptive quality of Morrinho's aesthetic vision. "Yet Morrinho is also a paradigm of self-determination and self-transformation, an example... of social sculpture. One in which the redirected lives of its authors are more than half the work" (Storr 2007:230). Notwithstanding the strong whiff of bootstraps-pulling narrative—including a mention of how Morrinho offers an alternative to a life in drug gangs—the curator ends on an almost self-reflexive note. It remains unclear who or what has "redirected" the lives of Morrinho's authors since, after all, it was Storr himself, with the institutional resources of the Biennale behind him, which directed them to Venice.

Storr assumed the role of dispassionate commentator over the aesthetic and moral qualities of artistic production, but the story he elides is the one in which he has already participated. When Morrinho becomes part of the Venice Biennale, the exhibition also becomes part of the artwork and the artists. Reprising Oswald de Andrade's anthropophagic instinct for Brazilian culture to ingest and synthesize elements of foreign culture, this reflexive effect may pose vexing problems for projects that aim to stabilize national cultures as authentic or intact repertoires.

The Morrinho youth invited to Venice seemed to have anticipated something about the Biennale, albeit with ambivalence. The young men themselves would be written about, photographed, interviewed, and presented as "artists," a label that conferred upon them notable legitimacy and prestige. The maquette replica in the Giardini of Venice would be seen as their work, but nonetheless alienable from its creators. A short film titled "The Revolt of the Toys," produced just before the Biennale trip, shows the young men playing out a fierce shootout between police and drug gang members by manipulating their bonecos. In the midst of play, the

diminutive avatars suddenly face their human counterparts and confront them in a heated debate over who the “real artists” of Morrinho are and thus who holds the right to travel to Italy. “No, see, we’re the artists who are going to reproduce all this over there,” reasons Antonio. “Without us there would be no Morrinho,” insists one resolute boneco. Throughout this argument, of course, the boys are discussing with themselves, alternating between cartoonish falsetto voices and their everyday speech tenor. The bonecos decide to go on general strike, and they all vanish overnight from the maquete. The human boys relent in the end to the collective power of the toys, who in the final scene are lugging tiny suitcases and singing joyously about going to Italy.

The film, shown in Venice alongside the installation and to visitors of the *in situ* original in Saqualé, ironizes yet interrogates the established categories of artist and artwork. Through the rarified honor of being selected to the Biennale, “Revolt of the Toys” shows Morrinho youth reflecting upon the changing relationship between these objects and themselves. As artists they felt (and perhaps feel) themselves to enter into an asymmetrical, hierarchized dynamic vis-à-vis what had now become “their creation.” That the bonecos in the film decide collectively to go “on strike” alludes to notions of proprietary creativity, whereby the artist(s) are the sole agents and owners of their creations. Indeed, that which was suggested to be co-produced through a dialectical relationship between subject and environment, as in Sofia’s remarks cited above, is here reframed as creators and *their* creation. This distinction gives absolute primacy to the agency of the innate power of imagination over the inert matter of bricks, concrete, and Lego blocks. Morrinho’s short film disrupts this ontological order that posits human subjectivity as capable of imbuing meaning into an inanimate material world. The ambiguous resolution, in which the bonecos see their demands met and accompany the youths to Venice, is in effect a

recognition of the reflexive power of that supposedly static environment over human intentionality and desire for semiotic control.

“Revolt of the Toys” also prefigured an innovation that Morrinho artists would introduce in successive venues: TV Morrinho Live is the title of a performance piece that accompanied exhibitions in Berlin and Vienna in 2008. It featured bonecos acting out a semi-scripted drama, all broadcast via three cameras in real-time onto a large projection screen for a viewing audience. These performances communicated that Morrinho was more than merely an inert sculpture, and reportedly kept the bonecos happy.

London: favelizing the global city

In 2010, Project Morrinho participated in a (Northern) summer-long cultural program called Festival Brazil organized by the Southbank Centre in London. Its website claims that “Southbank Centre is the largest single-run arts centre in the world.” It is a sprawling complex of cultural institutions along the Thames that includes concert halls, dance auditoriums, gallery spaces, and generally represents London’s central hub of high culture. This also represented a new form of engagement for the five Morrinho youth who traveled: they were put in collaboration with the Stockwell Park Community Trust, an organization made up of residents in low-income districts of Lambeth borough in south London. Large population of Portuguese and West Indian immigrants reside in Stockwell. The neighborhood’s Underground station was also the site of an infamous police shooting of unarmed Brazilian electrician Jean Charles de Menezes on July 2005, as police believed him to be one of the men responsible for the bombing attacks of the previous day. The Trust was formed to take action in addressing urban blight, gang violence

and poverty by gaining managing control over estates (public housing) services and budgeting, as well as initiating a range of youth programs.

Several youth from Stockwell and nearby Brixton showed their Morrinho guests around the neighborhood, where the linguistic barrier was breached through references to Brazilian soccer players and the film *City of God* (2002). “Is that a favela?” Marcus, one of the London hosts, asked about the movie.

“Yes,” replied Kamal and pointed at the estate houses around them. “City of God has houses just like these. In Portuguese they are called *conjuntos*.”

“It’s very...” Bruno wanted to add a description of the dense self-built constructions that overran the planned housing project of City of God, but his English failed him. He gestured, holding up a hand in a pinching motion while grimacing, indicating it was densely populated. Marcus misunderstood this as “thick with police presence.”

There were moments of recognition as young men of color led other young men of color through a skate park and past graffiti murals. They shared hip-hop, dub step, and funk carioca music saved on their mobile phones. Devin, a 20-year-old of Jamaican descent who accompanied us throughout the Morrinho visit in London, expressed astonishment at the conspicuous consumption of his Brazilian counterparts during off-time devoted to shopping excursions. “We can’t ever buy this stuff!” he confessed in a designer brand clothing shop. Meanwhile, at the check-out register, Leandro and Tiago rationalized to me that the “original” brand t-shirts they were purchasing sold for five times the price in Rio, and that everyone can identify the cheap knock-offs sold in the city center. Shopping in London offered them access to authenticity and enhanced status in consumer identity. Such encounters spoke to how Morrinho youth, as part of a growing Brazilian middle class buoyed (and defined) by a credit-fueled consumption boom were

continually caught up in the social implications of original-copy relations. Even as their own fame was based on the artistic production of miniature replicas, the symbolic order of prestige nonetheless hinged on distinguishing authentic branding from counterfeits, and distinguishing themselves by consuming those brands.

Soon after arrival, however, they commenced the commissioned work. The *Morrinho* installation was located in a wide public promenade at the foot of the steps leading up to the Hungerford Bridge, between the Royal Festival Hall and the balustrade overlooking the Thames. Situated in one of the most heavily trafficked pedestrian areas in London, for the eight weeks of the exhibition organizers estimated two million people would walk past the installation. A simplified map of the Southbank Centre complex functioned as a cipher. Printed in haphazard angles onto the different spaces of the area, like ink stamps, were the names of what counted as Brazilian national culture for the consuming Londoner masses: the names of music performers Gilberto Gil, Maria Bethânia, and AfroReggae⁶ were emblazoned over the Royal Festival Hall. “Capoeira” occupied a mysterious void in between the two main concert auditoriums. “Samba,” even more dubiously, was plotted onto the muddy banks of the Thames. Everywhere Brazilian bodies in motion, dancing, flipping. The imperatives “SHOP,” “EAT,” “DRINK” in large type. And finally, more inconspicuously, “Favela” inscribed over a multicolored blotch representing the *Morrinho* model.

During the week of mounting the model, the work was carried out behind a temporary fence, and curious onlookers would peer through the steel wires and read the bright yellow banner:

⁶ Neate and Platt (2006) recount the mobilization of Afro-Brazilian racial consciousness through music in their account of the Rio-based NGO Grupo Cultural Afro-Reggae. Yúdice (2003) also examines Afro-Reggae as a case study in what he terms the “NGOization of culture” whereby culture is instrumentalized to channel political subjectivities into legitimate expressive forms.

*PROJECT MORRINHO SOUTHBANK CENTRE FAVELA: A miniature city
hand-built by young people from Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, and Lambeth, UK*

Another sign explained the origins of Morrinho and “the positive message it conveys about young people in areas normally synonymous with poverty and crime.” It also described the collaboration between the Stockwell Park Estate and Morrinho youth as one of “discover[ing] differences and similarities about the environments in which they live, inspiring a joint landscape.” This message of positivity through artistic partnership caused considerable public friction, as the readers’ comments sections of blogs and online London newspaper articles announcing the exhibition became forums for indignation and anger. Commenters, many of them apparently middle-class Brazilian expatriates residing in Britain, charged that organizers were providing a platform for “criminal, lazy, dirty” favelados, or that the artists were asylum-seekers in disguise surely aiming to escape the misery and poverty of Rio.⁷

The construction used 4,000 structural terra cotta (or hollow clay tile) units from a building contractor in London, which resembled those used in the Rio original. The layout, two separate kidney-shaped hills, allowed the public to walk between and around the two parts of the model. The work followed a basic, repetitive preparation and arrangement of materials: each brick was chopped in half, perforated for windows, then encrusted into 45 tons of packed sand. They also laid down concrete to make roads and stairways.

This Morrinho, as with previous ones constructed in other cities, incorporated iconic elements of its immediate environs. A miniature London Eye Ferris wheel made with a bicycle wheel. A miniature St. Paul’s Cathedral. A miniature rail line running around the entire complex. A miniature Thames, filled with water. A fleet of black toy taxis. A miniature Big Ben. For many visitors, these familiar urban features clashed directly with the foreignness of the materiality of

⁷ Unfortunately, website administrators of the *London Evening Standard* later deleted the comments section. I inquired unsuccessfully with editors to recover these postings.

the terra cotta bricks. That is to say, the iconicity and indexicality of the representation of a city appeared at odds with each other, or at least produced an amalgam of referents.

Several Stockwell and Brixton youth learned their methods of building and collaborated in the construction of the exhibition. Crucially, they also adopted the spirit of making the model a reflection of their own urban imaginary. One playfully painted *Bricks Town* on one façade. They populated entire districts of the model with symbols from their lived reality. On the sides of buildings: the postcode *SW9*, *Kabob Shop*, *Halal Meat*, *Chinese food*, *Brixton Fruit & Veg*, tennis shoe and cell phone retailers, the police station and jail (figure 3). These urban fixtures were selective but hardly haphazard. One of the Stockwell youth who came to help build the model at Festival Brazil explained to a journalist: "I was in and out of prison from the age of 14 to about 20 ... It got a bit violent – it turned to guns. People were getting killed left, right and centre. I didn't want to end up dead, or end up killing anyone." Another added, "We want Brixton and Stockwell to be shown not as the evil place that it's known as" (Clarke and Simpson 2010).



Figure 3: Close-up of portion of Project Morrinho installation at Southbank Centre in London. This section was built by youths from Stockwell and Brixton and features elements of London’s poorer immigrant districts whose presence is generally unseen in the cultural center of the English capital. Photo by author.

Festival Brazil transmitted mixed messages about politics of space and the representation of urban identity. In one sense, it communicates a sense that a slum somewhere is equivalent to a slum anywhere, that spaces of certain forms of poverty and violence may differ but share common characteristics that form the basis for translocal cultural exchange. In the awkward yet productive exchanges between Morrinho and Stockwell youth, I could discern an attempt to foster Black Atlantic encounters out of a soft kind of environmental determinism that insisted on the “slum” as a unmarked (yet marking) category. In another register, simultaneously, the exhibition places the favela alongside samba, Gilberto Gil, and capoeira without specifying how they interrelate under the rubric of Brazilian cultural heritage, except as an affective repertoire. Another sign cites neo-noir detective novelist Patrícia Melo: “Brazil is astonishment, chaos and progress.” The sign added further weight to the widely held assumption that the spectacle of

exhibition simply trafficked in Brazilian exotica for British eyes. And yet, Festival Brazil, in incorporating the favela as a sign of national culture, permitted Stockwell youth to represent London's impoverished, ignored margins at its cultural center *on their own terms*, rather than as loiterers, vandals, criminals, or terrorists. As urban geographer Gareth Jones notes in a review of the exhibition, "Morrinho not only brought a favela to the South Bank but it also brought Brixton and Stockwell there too" (Jones 2011:705). Stockwell youth were able to deploy the open language of Morrinho as a method for challenging the symbolic order of their city. And in this gesture they are perhaps performing a politics not anticipated by organizers and promoters of exhibitions, by revealing the actual city of the global South already existing within the metropole. In this transnational collaborative art production, the artists incorporate landmarks of their lives into the display itself. In this sense, the copy becomes, semiotically speaking, co-produced.

Conclusions, and a postscript

The argument presented here follows anthropological work that finds that, in spite of the proliferation of copies in an age of mechanized automation, iteration produces seldom recognized but profound epistemological crisis. Put more simply, the world of things around us begs us to question how we think and speak about sameness, difference, and resemblance. Art appears to remain a privileged domain where such relations can be brought to the fore. In a recent endeavor to reinvigorate the anthropology of art, Nestor García Canclini argues that art has become "unframed," its autonomy of fields (to use Pierre Bourdieu's term) or worlds (Howard Becker) eroded. Contemporary art draws new political and theoretical connections that cut to and across social scientific disciplines by occupying a place of immanent possibility,

claims Canclini (2014). As different actors participate in the reproduction of *Morrinho* as traveling artwork, the image and sense of the city re-created in each instance also begins to spill over political and discursive boundaries meant to contain it. *Morrinho* takes its playful and often parodic relationship with the “real-world” favela as a departure point for a broadening repertoire of subversive moves. In this paper we have seen *Morrinho* obscure, ironize, reify, and expand its connection to “the favela,” or slums more broadly. These iterations are never exclusively self-referential but rather implicate the outside world and its players. Across three fieldsites—Rio, Venice, and London—I have drawn together ethnographic moments where what *Morrinho* as a mimetic object produces a frisson of ambiguity. At the Rio original maquete, a visitor adamantly defends its status as nothing else but *art*, in contradistinction to the rationalism of so-called models. In Venice, curatorial claims about artistic creativity and authorship are playfully challenged, not coincidentally, through the mimetic machine of video—a medium that opens a space for self-critique and meta-commentary. And in London, an engagement with local youth, which organizers intended to elicit common experiences of marginality, proceeded to unsettle of the order of center-peripheries. The life-world of the immigrant enclave spilled into the cultural center of the capital in the language of bricks and mortar.

As a final note, two more recent *Morrinho* exhibitions further support the main claims of this paper, while adding new wrinkles. In 2013, a replica constructed to inaugurate the Museu de Arte do Rio (MAR) and another model erected in the center of Queens College of City University of New York⁸ became the first *Morrinho* artworks intended to be permanent installations. Previous replicas, all temporary engagements, came preset with an expiration date that conditioned both the artists’ labor and spectators’ expectations, as they would all be

⁸ In full disclosure, the exhibition was co-organized by John Collins and the author of this essay to commemorate a Queens College yearlong program highlighting Brazilian society and culture.

dismantled at the closings of each event. While granting high prestige and visibility to the project, the permanent works at Queens College and MAR nonetheless introduced a sense of monumentality to Morrinho, and new curious sights: the New York replica became perhaps the first favela to be covered in snow, while the piece flanking the entrance to MAR soon became caked in dust from nearby construction work in the booming waterfront district. MAR is infamously built steps away from the site of the once largest slave market and slave burial ground in the world, the Cais do Valongo, an obscured history literally uncovered by recent excavations for new urban development. Accompanying Morrinho youth in September 2014 on a commissioned “maintenance” cleaning of their creation, I couldn’t help but notice a sharp contrast: the museum’s gleaming white structure projecting an image of a Rio de Janeiro tethering its future to the vagaries of financial capital, and the Morrinho housed within its front gate, encrusted with the grime of its place and history. We cleaned up the replica, but the thing still has no peace.

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