



*Jom Tob Azulay's interview for the BFVPP on October 23, 2018 in Rio de Janeiro. In attendance were: Jom Tob Azulay, Vivian Ostrovsky, Clarisse Rivera.*

## A selection

### **JOAO-T01**

**Jom Tob Azulay:** My name is Jom Tob Azulay, and I'm also known by my nickname, Jomico. It's an abbreviation: Jom + ico, which is a Moroccan abbreviation, resulting in Jomico. I'm a filmmaker and a retired diplomat from Rio de Janeiro.

0:35

**Vivian Ostrovsky:** Without you, the history of video art would be different...

**JTA:** This is how it went: in 1975, I was doing video and 16mm work, together with Angelo de Aquino, who was a visual artist. When [videotape] came along, so did 16mm equipment, which were "cousins" (VT and cinema). In fact, I owned both, so I had videotape equipment and 16mm equipment. And the relationship between the two was characteristic of my way of being, thinking and doing things. And this experience with VT with Anna Bella [Geiger] was very important. It was Angelo who put me in touch with her. I'd been good friends with Angelo since 1970, we lived together. He was a wonderful conceptual artist, influenced by Hélio Oiticica, Rogério Duarte, he told me a lot about both of them, the 1964 generation at MAM, that group with Roberto Magalhães, Antonio Dias, Gerchman... And during the time I lived in Los Angeles (1971-1974), studying cinema, photography, conceptual art, these things, in a way I was already preparing to leave the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, I felt that one day I would have to leave, I couldn't bear it anymore...

**VO:** What were you doing at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs?

**JTA:** I was a consul for Brazil. I was on the diplomatic career track. I still am, because then I came back and retired. At that time I was second secretary, and I had already been called before a commission of inquiry. That made me incompatible, and I began to have a lot of contact with people who opposed the regime, I began to take part in certain movements, but at the same time I was a career diplomat, so I went to Los Angeles, thinking I could take a break from the consulate, and it was even worse. I was in charge of the consular sector, which was a police function, having to screen the people who could give visas, who could renew passports, it was horrible, but, anyway, that's not exactly the point. That's why I was there. And, as I said, I was very good friends with Angelo de Aquino. He happened to go to Milan at that same time and we corresponded a lot. There's a package this big of letters from that time, which portray very well the concerns of an artist like him, who went into exile... And in one of those letters he recommends: look, don't return to Brazil without bringing Portapak equipment. Hélio Oiticica had pointed this out to me as soon as I landed. He recommended I buy a magazine which unfortunately, I've lost, but which you may be able to find, called *Radical Software*. This magazine dates back to the beginnings of video art in the world. It was one of those radical, underground, printed magazines, bought at newsstands in New York, but only sold in those underground stores where you could buy comics, Robert Crumb

magazines, and you could also find *Radical Software*. And I also remember that on the cover of *Radical Software* there was an American Indian holding a video camera. *Radical Software* was the most radical use that could be made of home video, which had just been invented. Because it was Ray Dolby who invented videotape for televisions. Televisions had to create it, because that film thing drove them crazy, having to develop it, all that horror... So there was a major paradigm shift, which was when television started using a virtual medium. The virtual era begins with the creation of videotape... It's the videotape of the videotape, integrated circuit, the development of this tape recorder that you have here, it's all integrated circuit, it starts with research into videotape. Except that they developed that two-inch videotape, then moved on to one inch, and at the same time developed the half-inch Portapak, and when they put this thing on the market, they released a bacterium. Before



that, it was just an invention. The first generation Portapak worked very well, they were made of metal, much heavier... Mine was a second-generation one, made of plastic. The difference between the first Portapak and the second was incredible. With a roll tape. But it's virtual, because you can't see the image, reproduction of the image and sound is virtual, it's electronic.

12:38

So the electronic age began there. And the visual artists, video art, intuited this. They were looking at the physical world through a virtual medium. But we didn't even know that, we didn't even use the expression "virtual medium", we weren't even aware of it. Why didn't they (the visual artists) conduct those same experiments with another medium? With super-8, for example? All those video art works that were made in those two waves could have been made with super-8, or in 16mm, or in 35mm, and would have been reproducible even... The feeling I have is that it's this transition from physical photographic film, physical support, to videotape that is the great transformation. It was virtual language, it was virtual communication, it was the virtual image that they saw for the first time. Before that, they only saw photographic images, which are analog images. Now, that image was recorded electronically on an iron oxide support.

**VO:** Yes, but it recorded image and sound. Because the sound was terrible in super-8...

**JTA:** Yes, but none of these videos have sound. None were interested in sound. Sometimes there was a soundtrack, but none of them did... Also because we didn't have any editing, all those videos were one single take.

**VO:** Well, Anna Bella used sound for *Declarações em retrato*.

**JTA:** But those are no longer from that wave, those are many years later. In that wave, the typical one she did was *Passagens*, climbing the stairs. This one doesn't have a word. None of them have any words, they weren't interested in the dimension of sound. So why didn't they do it on another medium? It's because they were fascinated by that virtual medium.

**VO:** There was also the issue of no longer having to develop the film.

**JTA:** No! I think they intuited the virtual image. It was the first time that virtual image was used for artistic purposes, for philosophical speculation. Because television didn't use it for that purpose; the purpose of videotape on television was only reproducibility, it was primarily functional. But not there: they started it. And it originated here in Rio, solely because Angelo de Aquino told me: don't come back here [without the Portapak]. And it was very cheap, a Portapak machine cost a thousand dollars. And with this fascinating ability to erase... When I think about the things I've erased – boy, it makes me want to slit my wrists – just for the pleasure of erasing and copying over, and using that image, and thinking, "I can't believe this works!" and listening to the sound, all at the same time....

21:07

Videotape was, so to speak, an extraterrestrial being that suddenly landed here like an ET, both for them and for me. Only I was here, messing around with my little movie things, making my rouchian documentaries, and they were there, making plastic arts and seeing plastic reality, and working with plastic reality. That's what they did, and I think they did it well. They did it so well that when they had to show it in São Paulo, Anna Bella said to me: "come along, you'll have to come along because they don't have a device to show it". So we flew together to São Paulo, and I took my Portapak. I did the whole job, I asked where the television was in the house, then I connected it to the television in the house... This was very interesting, I connected it to the television in the house and transmitted the RF signal, radio frequency, which goes into any antenna, I just had to remove the screw from the television antenna and insert my wire, the RF signal goes in there. So people could see inside their television set. None of this was theorized, none of it was talked about, none of it was conscious. In fact, there was no awareness at all. There was no talk of ideology...

23:56

**VO:** But before you went to São Paulo you had already filmed *Passagens* with Anna Bella at the Benjamin Constant Institute and on the stairs, right? That was your first shoot with Anna Bella...

**JTA:** With Anna Bella, it was the first. She had a strong influence on that whole group, people younger than her...

**VO:** And what directions did she give you? What was the shooting like?



**JTA:** "Shoot". She had the image, "I'm going to do it like this, I'm going to go up the stairs and you film me going up the stairs".

**VO:** And then that part at the Benjamin Constant Institute?

**JTA:** Yeah, then "Let's go there"... Now, there was the advantage of them being able to see it and say, "No, erase that one and let's make a closer one". There was a possibility to interfere with the image that wouldn't have existed in the case of cinema. That's important. This is all characteristic of the virtual, it's the virtual that allows this.

26:00

**VO:** You also filmed Sonia Andrade's first, in Jardim Botânico.

**JTA:** This was even a bone of contention at one point. It was very interesting that each artist has their own personality, some are more conceptual, some are visual, and others are more scenic, dramatic, like Sonia Andrade and Ivens Machado. In Ivens's case, it was a tension between two men, a homoerotic tension, kind of sadomasochistic, in other words, a scenic vision of a life situation, a scenic-dramatic treatment. And Sonia Andrade's was, in a certain sense, the most successful, because it was based on the reality of the Brazilian middle-class woman, making a feijoada, and she suddenly takes the feijoada as a symbol of Brazilianness, which I find very interesting, and she adopts a posture of conformism at first and reaches an arc that extends all the way into transgression... It was very funny, she ended up being the star of the series.

**VO:** And did she tell you beforehand that she was going to throw all the beans at the camera?

**JTA:** Oh yes, of course, it was all arranged, it wasn't even that much beans. It wasn't a Hollywood production, I think there was just one feijoada. You couldn't go wrong with that, you rehearsed the picture... But I think it was the virtual thing that caught on. A lot of people in the US worked with it. I think Nam June Paik was the first to really treat it... I don't know, you're better informed than I am, there are wonderful video artists in the US who may have predated him, but I think that TV Garden thing he did...

**VO:** He was the first one who made an impact, yes.

30:45

**VO:** And with Leticia Parente, did you film with her, too?

**JTA:** Of course, a lot! More than once.

**VO:** How was it with her?

**JTA:** Leticia was a very sweet person, a very quiet person... Grown kids and all. What was striking about Leticia was her humility. And she worked with this reality of the oppressed woman, or not, but this essentially feminine thing, this almost secret, exclusive thing, but it wasn't easy for her, because she would even... Sewing leads to self-mutilation, but she did it without drawing too much attention to herself, in a very humble, friendly way. The work was seen as important.

**VO:** Yes, it really has an impact. They're short, but they are so powerful! Even today.

**JTA:** I think Sonia Andrade was the one who did the most work in this area. And then there are her children, André, who later became a professor. I don't know how things evolved later in São Paulo.

**VO:** In São Paulo, afterwards, there was Regina Silveira, Ana Maria Maiolino worked in super-8...

33:25

**JTA:** Now, how are you doing this work? Is it a book you're doing?

**VO:** A website. So that it can be accessible to all researchers in Brazil, outside Brazil, artists, and whoever is interested. If the artist is alive, we do an interview, we try to recover the work and preserve it, we do the master tape with Electronic Arts Intermix (EAI), in New York.

**JOAO-T02**

**JTA:** Do they still have a Portapak playback system, that sort of thing?

**VO:** EAI does. The idea is to preserve the work and give the artist the master tape that was made. The artist does whatever they want with the master. One copy is kept at Videobrasil and another copy stays at Electronic Arts Intermix.

01:00

**JTA:** Are the artists cooperating, handing over their videos, etc.? They aren't, right?



**VO:** Anna Bella agreed immediately. It's very funny, because the purpose of video is precisely this freedom to disseminate, show and reproduce.

**JTA:** But there's also this 19th-century artist attitude, of exacerbated individualism, of being a creator, that there's no way around, it's a mindset of not divulging. In today's world, that's total madness. There's no such thing as a copy anymore, let alone an original. Every copy is an original. This is in an essay by Walter Benjamin that I remember reading at the time, which was important, *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction*, which we read at the time. There will come a day when people will come home, open the images and the sounds will be reproduced, just like the water in our bathroom sinks. What are you going to do? What you have to do is get people to discuss your work, to talk about your work, to reach people, to be reached by them. Now, if you're going to sit in an ivory tower...

**VO:** Most of these people are now over 80, those who are alive; Letícia died very early. So I decided to interview them too, to collect...

**JTA:** Of course. It's just as important.

**VO:** Yes. In São Paulo we interviewed Arlindo Machado...

**JTA:** Arlindo was very important in their minds afterwards. I think it just gave them more to discuss at those "exoteric" meetings they liked to have. I don't believe that contributed much, because in fact, video art that did not converge with conceptual art hardly found a space of its own. I think its own space ended up being experimental cinema and conceptual art, and those who didn't go into cinema went into conceptual art.

06:00

**VO:** Anna Bella said that one day Letícia Parente took a cab and forgot all her equipment inside. Was it your equipment?

**JTA:** No, it was hers. She bought some equipment of her own.

**VO:** What happened to your equipment?

**JTA:** I gave it to André. He took it to the School of Communication at the Federal University of Rio de Janeiro. I still have a lot of it lying around, Portapak rolls, nothing historical, but it wouldn't hurt to look at it someday. We'll see. Maybe one day I'll be able to get hold of these rolls and take them to New York, to delve into this archaeology.

07:30

**VO:** And how do you see the world today, with iPhones, smartphones and video images everywhere?

**JTA:** I think it's a story, Vivian, that begins precisely at the moment when these visual artists become aware of virtual communication. I would almost compare them doing those exercises to those aborigines, you know, in Kubrick's movie *2001*, who discover the force of gravity, when they throw a bone up and it falls and they learn to kill with the bone, they throw it upward, and then it melts into a rocket... I think there's a direct relationship between these Portapak images and what's happening on the internet today, on a planetary scale.

24:10

**CR:** Can you talk a bit about the art scene in Rio at that time and the context of Rio at that time? We're always trying to put things into context. A lot of people know what it was like, but it's good to hear from someone who lived through it.

**JTA:** Look, living under a dictatorship, as we did... It happened all of a sudden. We lived very well, in Paradise, and one day we saw that the place we had always passed was now forbidden. Then you start to relearn how to live. And Rio de Janeiro has always had a proverbial very open, very receptive space for social coexistence, due to its heritage as a colonial capital. It has always had a very cosmopolitan, universalist inclination, absorbing fashions... Cariocas are known for being this way, fickle. It's very Macunaíma in that sense, one hour it's one thing, tomorrow it's another, cyclothymic...

26:10

The atmosphere in Rio de Janeiro had always been very welcoming. Nowadays it's far from that, because you can't go anywhere in Rio de Janeiro without running the risk of being mugged, it's a terrible feeling, it's really inconceivable for a carioca of that time. It's not because social inequality wasn't huge, as social inequality has always been terrible, but because spirits were more disarmed, there was less social tension of all kinds. And with that, it was wonderful: the beach was wonderful, Arpoador was wonderful. And Rio de Janeiro was the birthplace of Cinema Novo, of Bossa Nova. I used to frequent this area a lot, Copacabana, Ipanema, Bossa Nova,



spearfishing. I was a dive fisherman, I went spearfishing with Arduíno Colasanti, Roberto Menescal... So it was a group of people. Nara Leão... I'm talking about the late 1950s, an 18-year-old boy going out on a Friday night, what did I do? I chose whether to go to Zeppelin or Jangadeiros. Then I'd get to Zeppelin, look around, there was a table with Carlinhos de Oliveira and Tom, and I'd sit at the table with them and spend the whole night listening to Tom Jobim and Carlinhos de Oliveira talking, and that's an absolutely unique opportunity for an 18-year-old. I heard about Nelson Rodrigues for the first time... And the traffic was very heavy. Rio de Janeiro is the opposite of São Paulo in that sense. São Paulo has this provincial thing, forgive me, but it has this closed thing, here it's the opposite, here everyone was an existentialist. At the height of summer, those girls in turtle-neck sweaters and sunglasses, all looking like Juliette Greco. And we were discovering women too, because it was that very Europeanized environment here, all the Europeans had been frequenting this region, the beach, since the 1930s. So they really broke down our provincialism, that macho view that men have of women, women to marry and women to have sex with? Everything used to be split up like that. Ipanema was very good in this respect, in terms of breaking down these barriers against gays and everything, in general. We were very questioning of these things. For example, we read a lot of Sartre, Kerouac, existentialists, beatniks... That's pre-Beatles, pre-rock. And in that sense, Rio de Janeiro really safeguarded the people who dedicated themselves to art, they were protected... That art is harmless, except when it goes beyond certain limits, like Antonio Manoel, who was arrested at the Museum of Modern Art, some films that were censored, then it was a problem, we had to negotiate with... But you learn to live with it. It's amazing how we live with oppression as if it were the most natural thing in the world. Before long, everyone thinks it's absolutely normal to accept certain practices which, in principle, would be automatically inconceivable, like, for example, me having to submit the film I've made to a censorship body so that it can tell me if I... What sense does that make? However, we accepted it. Today, I think it should be difficult to impose this again, because these achievements are so deeply ingrained. Many people are betting on the institutional stability of the Constitution and of Brazil. I think it's going to be a test, a big test. I'd like to know what we'll be thinking in a year's time. But back then it was much less threatening than today. I feel more vulnerable now than I did then.

34:28

**VO:** But what about before and after AI-5?

**JTA:** AI-5 was a predictable development. That's what I mean, for example. Because Brazil has had other military interventions since 1922, some successful, others unsuccessful. And the military took power and handed it over to civilians. In 1964 they did the same thing, with the commitment to hand over power to civilians, only this time they didn't - it was 1968. And then it lasted 20 years. That's what I'm afraid of, something like this. That something is off the curve.

36:26

**JTA:** I'm going to be a regular on your site, because it's a place to socialize, isn't it? Life has improved a lot since the internet, computers and all that. And cinema! How we suffered in the analog era. What I went through there has earned me a place in heaven. It really was hell making films in the analog era, because the technology was so far behind. Today the quality, the technology is the same - New York, Rio de Janeiro, wherever. And I think the internet has been a great advancement in every way. A website where I can have a dialog about a subject that interests me is good, because it's a conversation that is renewed. This reconstitution of history is very interesting, because you'll end up talking about much more than the history of cultural policies in Brazil. Because the plastic arts have never been very interested in cultural policy.

**THE END**