

ArtReview

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Chelpa Ferro

When it comes to definitions, the three members of Chelpa Ferro prefer to be called a band but concede that 'multimedia group' might better describe what they are really about



They have exhibited in the Brazilian Pavilion at the Venice Biennale and are about to record their fourth studio album. The visual aspect of their performances and installations, they say, is just as important as the sonic effects

Interview by Oliver Basciano

Barrão makes sculptures, Sérgio Mekler edits feature films and Luiz Zerbini is a painter; together however they are Chelipa Ferro, a band

and artist collective that has been making a big noise since the mid-1990s. Based in Rio de Janeiro, the three put aside their respective work to meet up each Wednesday at Zerbini's studio and plan exhibitions of their sonic sculptures – ad hoc lo-fi kinetic assemblages whose movements create sonic environments – or to discuss and rehearse for occasional gigs played as a straight, cacophonous band, albeit one that stretches the limits of sound generation. The 'instruments' range from guitars, drums and keyboards, to various miscellaneous everyday items – electric hand saws, ball bearings on Perspex – freely manipulated for their sonic qualities. There's a playfulness to the work – the comic absurdity to be found in how much sound one can produce by attaching motors from food blenders to a series of kitschily colourful plastic bags in their *Jungle Jam* (2006) installation, for example – that perhaps stems from the laid-back attitudes of the three old friends. Yet Chelipa Ferro is no side project: the group is working on its fourth studio album, it represented Brazil at the 2005 Venice Biennale and it is shown by commercial galleries in Brazil and the UK (Chelipa Ferro has shows at Sprovieri, London, and Vermelho, São Paulo, next year).

ARTREVIEW *How did you come together as a band?*

LUIZ ZERBINI We were friends before Chelipa Ferro. I'm from São Paulo. When I moved to Rio, I met Barrão and Sérgio.

SÉRGIO MEKLER In 1995, or in 1993 – we can't remember – Chacal, the poet from Rio, invited us to perform at his theatre.



SM For people from the music world, we are a multimedia group, but for artists, we are on the border.

LZ We had never performed before, but he invited us, and even though we couldn't play anything, we accepted. That was our first performance.

SM Back then we were just playing guitars. A music-producer friend came to tell us that the sound was bad, that we needed to improve it and that he would like to help us. Then he invited us to make a record at his studio.

AR *So you're now a proper band?*

BARRÃO It's not as easy as it looks! It was really very funny when we went to the place, because it was the first time that we did this, and they asked to check the sound. The sound techs looked at us with our very old guitars, without cables or amplifiers. But then we started to understand how it worked, and I think that really put us in a position to experiment with sound.

SM We found another way to play together. We don't make music; we improvise. So I think now we're better with this technique, provided we only play together.

LZ It's a good question, though, because we were in the newspaper [*O Globo*] today and they called us a multimedia group. They always talk about us as a multimedia group. I think it's the best word to define what we do, but we prefer to be a band.

facing page Chelipa Ferro. Courtesy the artists
above Chelipa Ferro, *A Antópsia da Cigarra Gigante*, 2008, performance (Teatro Oi Casa Grande, Rio de Janeiro).
Photo: Gregoire Basdevant. Courtesy the artists

AR *How did the installations come about? Are the objects, which make the intentionally nonmelodious noise, partial stand-ins for yourselves?*

B When we made that record, we recorded a lot of stuff, and then we began to edit everything. When we decided to release the record, we couldn't play it live, because we weren't musicians. We couldn't replicate the noises easily. So we did some installations, some sculptures to play the record, and some things that are not on it but that related to the sounds. We only began to regularly play live once we improved.

LZ We felt like we had the potential to do a good thing together. We started playing together because there was opportunity, but we knew that together we could integrate that into the artworld. So we got more varied instruments and found we could also make noise without proper instruments.

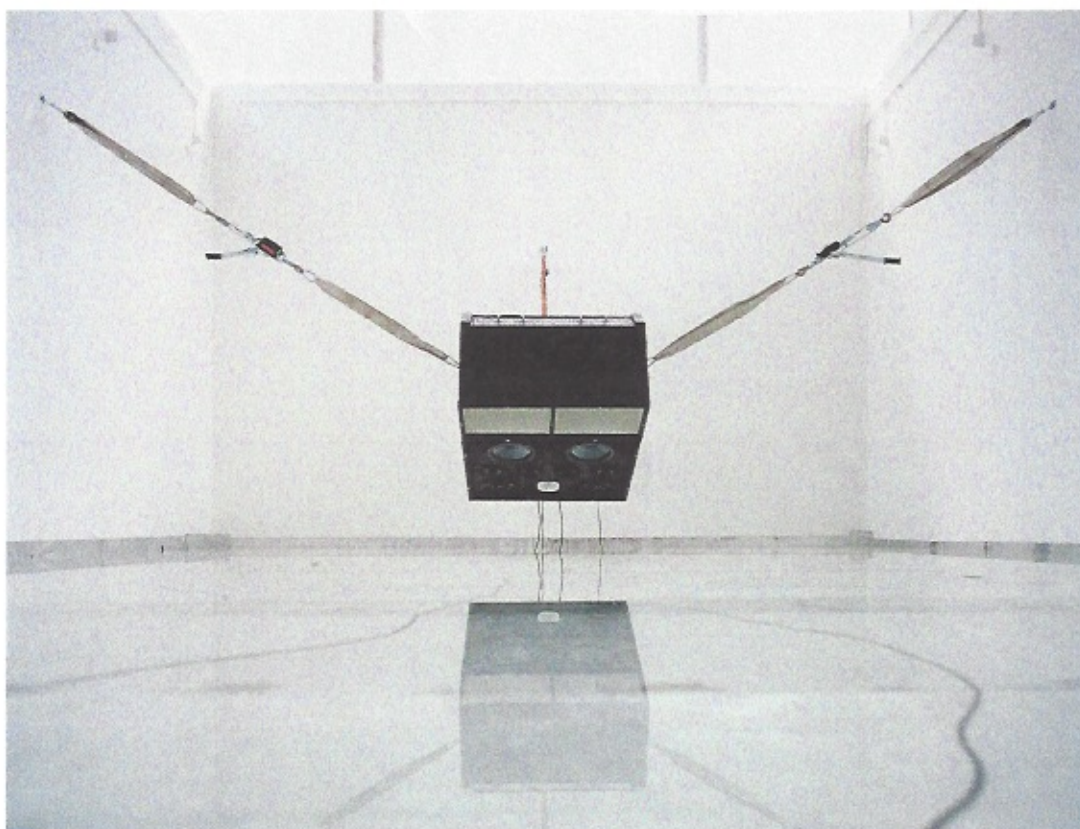
AR *Some of the objects make the noise that is expected of them, though. In one work, a branch with dried seedpods is attached to a motor that vibrates and causes the seeds to shake. Do you choose these objects for their sonic properties?*

B It's mixed, because I think the visual part is very important. Sometimes that comes first, so it's not always about the sound.

SM Either the sound or the visual can come first and we come up with a solution for the other. We made a chair, for example, but attached a motor so that it would shake and walk – that's an object chosen for visual properties, made to make noise.

AR *The installations are made from found objects and basic second-hand electronics removed from everyday items: how much is that a conscious reference to Arte Povera and Brazil's own distinct history of using nonrarefied materials in art?*

So how do you pin down what, exactly, Chelapa Ferro is?
And does that matter anyway?



Acqua Falsa, 2005 (installation view, Brazilian Pavilion,
51st Biennale di Venezia). Photo: Julio Callado.
Courtesy the artists

B I think we pay attention to what is around us. We think about these ordinary objects and try to change them, or find other meanings to them. It's a reaction to the everyday world, as opposed to anything grand. It's looking at the small things.

LZ At the same time, I think there's an identity in the things that we show. I hope one gets a feel as to where they have come from.

SM We like to find the objects. If we need some speakers, we naturally look for old speakers – looking through the markets, searching the streets – we don't just buy new ones. We didn't have the money to buy new ones early on.

B And we like the experience of searching these things out.

AR Does the fact that they are locally sourced lend them a particularly 'Brazilian' identity, do you think? Or a particularly Rio identity?

LZ I feel that people see it that way, so I understand, and I agree that it's got a Brazilian identity. [to others] Don't you think so?

B Yes, or rather than a Brazilian one, maybe a third-world identity. But it's just because we are interested in the things around us. When we did a performance at Sprovieri in London [in 2010], we did it with a lot of objects that were found in the streets around the gallery, so perhaps that took on a different look because of the change in source.

AR What about the music?

SM We were invited to a music festival in Bologna. There were a lot of people from the noise scene. When we finished our show, the guy who organised the event said we have a very special kind of noise, he said it was a 'Brazilian noise' with a 'sweet kiss'.

B He said it had a Brazilian rhythm, yet people in Brazil think we are completely alien to the culture. There's no tradition of this kind of music here.

AR Is there not? Of the kind of improvised, experimental noise music you make?

B I think now it's getting bigger here. Now there are three places in Rio that you can see and hear this kind of music.

SM And it was hard for the galleries or museums to understand it. They didn't have the right equipment. They couldn't understand that we needed to rent an amplifier for a month – it's very expensive for them, and they probably wouldn't have been able to sell the work after.

LZ We were once asked to play a gig in the morning at a museum, which was very strange for us and the visitors.

SM What's interesting is the difference between the art people and the people from noise music that come to see us. When we were starting out, we invited people that we knew from the galleries to see the show. They couldn't believe it – it was weird, the gig environment was another world to them. They didn't know about this music, and they didn't expect this from us. Luis, they knew from his painting, and Barrão from his sculpture. Now, happily, it's not like this any more. Now people like it more, and they stay to watch.

Ruim, *Chelpa Ferro's fourth studio album, will be released later this year.*



Chelpa Ferro, *Jungle Jam* (installation view, Museu de Arte Moderna da Bahia, Salvador, 2008), 2006. Courtesy the artists