

Conversation between Luiz Camillo Osorio and Ilê Sartuzi

PIPA Prize

1 – Tell me about your education and how it was developed so that your production would incorporate elements of moviemaking, visual arts, computer sciences and theatre.

I started producing at a very young age, exploring painting within a classic approach and a rigorous study of the human figure. In university, that interest broadened into other languages and mediums, so I began to explore the image of the body in space, focusing on the relations between the two-dimensional image in space and the flattened corporeality of the sculpture. From the moment I felt the desire to produce using tools that overcome what was traditionally assumed as the field of fine arts, it became necessary to conduct a more specific research in each area.

I've collaborated many times with artists of different specialties, in order to learn about elements that were being requested by the works. That is, it seems to me that incorporating other elements in my production is a desire that is born from itself – if such independence can even be placed upon work.

Parallel to fine arts production, my education ended up being trespassed by a series of encounters that sparked a theoretical interest. This critical investigation is still a source of work (facing precariousness, artists who have to pay for their own bills often need to engage in other paid activities), but it has also always been a complementary part of my poetic exploration. Working in public and private institutions, the defense and promotion of critical debate around art and culture is a founding aspect of my education. In university research groups and at bars, a rigorous reading practice provided me with conceptual tools for direct confrontation with other artist works in interviews and studios, and, evidently, all that results in a critical view about my own production.

2 – By looking at your work, we realize there is a curious combination of organic and mechanic elements, of soft materials and motors, of fragmented bodies and arbitrary movements, voices that speak for themselves. There is an unusual mixture of Samuel Beckett and Louise Bourgeois, having a weariness of fixed forms in common. Does that make sense? Tell me a little bit about where your work speaks from.

I believe that this is a good reading, and your question may be interpreted in several ways. Your own description seems to point out that the artworks speak for themselves. Sometimes, you have humanoid bodies resembling automata, but at other times you have non-anthropomorphic objects that come to life. In both cases, they evoke an uncanny feeling of an inanimate object that starts to simulate some vivacity.

However, there is ambiguity there: if those objects speak for themselves, it's also hard not to imply a sort of puppeteer.

On the other hand, if I interpret where my work comes from within an historical point of view, I feel comfortable with your remarks. (laughs) Both examples you've summoned carry a more or less explicit psychological density that can resonate in those objects – granted with movement, speech and choreography –, which could assume a certain projection of artificial “subjectivity”. But, most of all, they are artists whose interest for the exploration of form led them to expand the boundaries of these fields. I mean, this exercise of freedom to go beyond the “fixed forms” is given within each practice – for instance, scrutinizing the literary text to the last consequences – as well as by engaging in peripheral unfoldings, such as radio or television pieces. When it comes to Bourgeois, she ended up creating a series of signs that outline her own mythology, and, at the same time, reverberate something of the ordinary (that reminds me a little of Tunga as well). I'm interest in particular on “cells”: translated into Portuguese, it can be either “celas” (as in a cage) or “células” (the smallest life unit), indicating an assemblage in which the artist consolidates an installation thought and composes a scene starred by this recurring mythology.

In any case, these two possibilities that indicate where my works come from go hand in hand. Having in mind the very work structure, which I believe to be a privileged path to investigation, we can recall the final scene of *cabeça oca espuma de boneca* (hollow head doll's foam – 2019), in which we had two androids perform a conversation created by artificial intelligence. On the one hand, that object spoke from itself, but it also had words coming directly from a dataset of users that experimented with this chatbot and its algorithm. That is, it spoke from a midpoint, or the average of interactions with human users (only that could spawn a long conversation). But also, the result of a lack of coherence and the chatbot's simple programming generated a fragmented text, whose core was difficult to define and which easily migrated from one subject to the other. Taking that result as an example, I like to compare this dramatic structure to *Waiting for Godot* (1952) for their formal resemblance. In the end, what I would like to point out is that the artwork is inserted within an nonlinear inherence or tradition of patterns, whether the author chooses or not, announcing some place from where they come and go back to.

3 – In *cabeça oca espuma de boneca*, we have a theatre without actors, with machines, mannequins and voices running through space. A theatre without actors is a theatre without drama, but their mechanic bodies are fragile and expose that fragility. What drives this dramaturgy? Does it work the same way on stage as in video?

Dramaturgy and form, which seem to me inseparable in this case, are driven by their own objects. But that does not make it necessarily a theatre without drama. The first event of the play unchains a movement that will follow through the entire time-span of the play, in parallel. Two glued latex skins are raised, and then torn apart by the tension produced in opposite senses by a motor system and counterweight. After separated, one of the skins draws the limits of the “stage”, moving to a higher plan until it comes back in the final scene. It is, therefore, a cyclic narrative outline, since the same skin that was torn goes back, at the end, to the beginning, as if under a return drive.

From that first movement, each subsequent scene was shaped by one or more devices. The fragility you point out could also be a dramatic element. Not because the bodies themselves are fragile, but because it seems that such a complex system – and, at the same time, a precarious one – open up possibilities for a series of failures that would expose some fragility.

That is, in general, these mechanical devices, besides offering a relation with their own time – whether with simultaneous unfoldings, whether by focusing the spectator's attention into specific details from every scene –, they create a central appeal of drama: the immanent possibility of failure and lack of control. Dealing with imperfect mechanisms, the impossibility to predict future failures adds up a tension to the spectator's experience. Somehow, this possible autonomous dimension of some of the mechanisms could go out of control and assume a self-destructive aspect, referring us, for instance, to *Homage to New York*, by Yves Tinguely. In the terms of these machines and objects, coming to life means, for us, to lose control.

Now, it is certainly a work to be seen in direct experience. I made a movie of the play, which became a video installation on three channels, together with Quina filmes. It was a nice work, but it's completely different. The three channels made it possible to create something closer to the play, because we were able to show several things happenings simultaneously, as it was originally. But that matter – that theatre production had to face last year – will never be solved with a perfect substitute. There is something about the body experience and spatial projection that is unique in theatre. What I was interested in and the reason I refer to my work as a theatre play without actors is precisely the traditional rite that theatre implicates: to drive to the place, enter the space, wait for the spectacle to begin, relate directly to things, the end cut and going back to the real world.

4 – There is a lot of manual work and technology in your work process. What is the greatest challenge for the use of new technologies in arts? I remember some conversations I had with Palatnik in which he made sure to emphasize that technology was never an end, but a resource; that he was not worried to be up to date with new inventions, but he used them to produce optical events. How do you perceive that in your poetics?

I agree, there is this danger in the enchantment of the technique and that the use of any technology should not be naive, including the traditional technologies of the artistic field. That is, any gesture in the elaboration of a work must be understood as such, and as an inalienable part of the artwork. As I mentioned earlier, the use of other techniques and tools came from the very need of the work's development. It wasn't something I was knew *a priori*, and that I decided to introduce in my practice for mere effect. Unlike Palatnik – whose house I also had the pleasure to visit on a particular occasion –, who had a technical education for mechanical production, the first steps towards the use of some machines and microcontrollers is accompanied by other collaborators, in my case.

However, we cannot leave aside the fact that each tool can also create new perspectives, and ultimately new subjectivities. Therefore, taking the case of photogrammetry, although the desire to use such technique precedes the understanding and study of that technology, as soon as you begin to explore its

possibilities, it indicates a visuality of its own that differs from video footage. That leads me, for example, to ghostly and continuous movement of the camera I was interested in, whose realization in the physical world would demand conditions I do not have access to.

The digital space – which is no state-of-the-art technology – presents entirely different associations. The thing is: even if it's something we all know, when it was massively appropriated by the art world, it was made in the most conservative way possible. That is, the digital space mimics real physical space – the white walls and the burnt cement floor of art galleries. What *Dollhouse Gallery* (2020) explores, regarding that matter, is an unexpected situation, something that would be impossible outside the digital world. The repetition – which was a central formal aspect of the original dollhouse – assumes a *mise en abyme* format, not only for the representation of a small house inside the dollhouse that returns to itself, but also for the development of a work inside the other. I think it turns out to be something recurring: my production is usually very consequent, and, sometimes, self-referential, or it uses parts of previous works in order to make something.

The point is that the issue was never to use more modern technologies or not, but what to do with those tools. As I was saying, each form – be it a technological device, a particular brushstroke or traditional structures of representation of art – carries in itself its history. I try not to be too naive about it, and eventually, I adopt those historical features. But I find it difficult to classify the general use of the latest technologies in the production, because they vary a lot. I believe that maybe something that surpasses this is a hybrid relationship with those technologies, combining ancient techniques such as puppet theatre or ventriloquist puppets with a more or less simple technology from contemporary mechatronics.

5 – Your appropriation in video of Beckett's *Worstward Ho!* is very interesting, specially knowing that it was done during the pandemic and social isolation, as if the loss of the world to which we were subjected forced us to assume the failure of our modern civilizational project. Our progress is our disaster. "Try again. Fail again. Better again. Or better worse. Fail worse again. Still worse again." How do we branch out so we don't drive into abyss? What would you say is the role of art in coping with this impending disaster?

I believe that a central issue is that the idea of the failure of our modern civilizational project seems to come from a post-modern point of view; but there is, in fact, a series of modernity issues that have never been overcome. Ironically, to me, the starting point into understanding the role of art comes from modern thinking.

Faced with an engagement that is based on a set of established ways – an "accommodation to the world" in order to convey its messages – I'd rather bet on the "shock of the unintelligible" of autonomous art and the understanding of a complex meaning of forms, as advocated by Theodor Adorno. Coinciding with your question, one of the radical examples the author brings in his seminal work, *Engagement* (1962), is precisely Samuel Beckett. Repetition – which is the basis of *Worstward Ho!* – is about exploring form to its most radical reduction. Following a similar logic of Adorno's, the French philosopher Alain Badiou writes about Beckett's text that: "If there is no adequation, if the saying is not prescribed by "what is said,"

but governed only by saying, then ill saying is the free essence of saying or the affirmation of the prescriptive autonomy of saying.”

That interpretation is resonated in Adorno’s thinking, in which “ill saying” is resistance though forms that were not previously accepted by the world order. That is, “*Art is not a matter of pointing up alternatives but rather resisting, solely through artistic form, the course of the world, which continues to hold a pistol to the heads of human beings.*” The work of art has no final purpose, because it is an end in itself. Some may say that is a position that alienates artistic production, but we must have in mind that “*there is no material content, no formal category of an artistic creation, however mysteriously changed and unknown to itself, which did not originate from the empirical reality from which it breaks free.*”

Of course, there is a number of other attitudes outside the artistic field; concrete confrontations that must be carried out as a subject of the political field. But that does not mean “autonomous art” does not have its political impact, quite the opposite: what is at stake is the way we view this engagement, which sometimes simplifies the political spectrum. “Bad politics becomes bad art, and vice versa”.

I think we may see that treadmill “into abyss” in two ways. If in your question it represents the decay of humanity, regarding the political and economic scenarios and the values that ultimately rule the public sphere, it is at full steam and art will not be the one to prevent the fall. There are things that are no up to art to solve. It would be naïve to think it would resolve all material and immaterial problems. Part of the struggle is fought with public policies, social movements and within the historical class struggle. Sometimes, art may want to disguise what is supposed to be a class conflict. On the other hand, if that abyss represents the “ill saying”, then it becomes a possibility for art to open its cracks and explore the breaches. Not to ease the fall, but to sharpen the consequences of the actual failure of the modernity project that is yet to come.

6 – How the pandemic affected your work? What will never be the same?

I don’t think that event has had a decisive and irreversible effect, as opposed to what was believed at the beginning. But also, to take a stand at the heat of the moment may be precipitated. The basic class structure remains, and, thus, no revolutionary change in subjectivity seems to arise from this. In terms of artwork, this period has made room for developments that were in course within my production, and, at the end of the day, the tools that I started to explore seem to respond well to a number of issues raised by isolation. Nevertheless, both videos – *Night and Day* and *Worstward Ho!* (2020) – relate directly to an investigation of videos conducted in an apartment, that, since 2016, was designed as a space of exception, an isolated reality. *ensaio, h* (rehearse, h – 2017) is a video that is part of that investigation, in which the only experience outside the apartment is mediated by computer images and virtual visits. I mean, many issues that were raised during this period were already part of previous investigations that came together in different ways.

There will certainly be impacts and changes in some work relations, in the art market, and in the way we relate to each other that should unfold over the next years. But I tend to be resistant to the idea that the

disastrous impact of this phenomenon will have drastic and longing implications. A recurring statement is that human “nature” and its technical and cultural ingenuity is that of adaption (often together with a conservative tendency). The “sharpening” lapse in the conditions of isolation, hyperconnectivity and social distancing are a rehearsal for c central issues in the next steps of the development of the species.