

## PAINTING AS A QUESTIONING

Carlos Zilio

Translated by Ana Carolina Azevedo

**ABSTRACT:** This article analyzes the making process of my painting. Since the historical feeling of the crisis of modernity, painting has always meant to me a manner of comprehending the amplitude and meaning of the said crisis.

**KEYWORDS:** painting, crisis of modernity, contemporary art.

In the second half of the 60s, the crisis of modernity in Brazil, already predicted by the end of the Brazilian Constructive Project in its Concrete Arts and Neo-Concrete Art versions, gained its definitive expression in the movement known as the New Brazilian Figuration. The premises of this production could be summarized into some general principles: execution impersonality, which implicated the possibility of reproducibility of the work and the questioning of its authority; the interaction between work and spectator; the non-hierarchy between high and low cultures, and the connection between arts and politics. My work of art rises inside this context, marked by these questionings that therefore were already found outside the logics of an ontology based in form.<sup>1</sup>

The discussion that my work lived through in this period is that of placing itself in a culture that was entering — even peripherally — the scope of consumer society. Distancing myself from the interest

\* Author's note. This essay is partly made up from points made on many other critic texts on my works. It is based upon a talking I gave to the Ciclo de Palestras organized by Prof. Icléia Cattán and whose theme was *A Pintura em Seu Campo Específico* (Painting inside its Specific Field) at Fundação Iberê Camargo in 2010. It is a part of my CNPq research.

<sup>1</sup> I have been present at some of the most important exhibitions from that period, such as *Opinião 66* and *Nova Objetividade Brasileira* in 1967, both at MAM, Rio de Janeiro.

by autonomy of form, what had become important was the presence of the image linked to a verb, as a source open for experimentation. The important thing was the potential of communications with the public and the possibility of activating the circuits of political relations, in a way to operate a maneuver of social de-alienation. In a second moment, already in the 70s, this experience begins to incorporate new sources that reverberate directly in the period's production and in my work. Duchamp displaced this debate and language to a more norm-defining field on putting the radical aspect of the question of art's own nature. On the other side, if the tradition of Brazilian constructive art had already suffered a rupture, the endurance of its lesson remained and this time, Minimal and Post-Minimal will also relocate questions that renew the possibilities of phenomenological investigation.

Moments of this trajectory can also be detected in my work since this period. A lunchbox that, when opened, reveals a face overwritten with the word LUTE [Fight] on its mouth (1967); a so-called "businessman" suitcase that, when opened, reveals many metal nails (1973); or wooden structures over which rock blocks are balanced in tension (1976). These are three examples of the process I've mentioned.<sup>2</sup> The experience one can obtain with my production between 1966 and 1976 is that of the delusion of modernity. From this point on, to me, it was a matter of understanding the broadness and meaning of this crisis, of analyzing its premises and canons, in a way I could extract from this discussion a pertinent historic relation. To do such, I've chosen painting, which was in the core of the crisis of art on account of having been modern and classic art's paragone. Not by chance, all of Greenberg's formalism concept has painting as its core. Above all, choosing painting was a demonstration that I understand its potential as a theoretical field capable of proportionate a critical and productive point of view, because of the said discussion.

This period of new challenges necessarily has to be thought from the referential point of view of my living in Paris from 1976 to 1980. In this respect, Paulo Venancio Filho makes an interesting comment: "Would the fact of vanguardist artists and political commitments being the starting line to Paris' mystical pictorial tradition's discreet presence (probably the last one since Eduardo Sued) be an irony of art? To find pleasure in an overdue artistic wager, in a unimpeded terrain of modern claims which must account for itself only, is to be considered compensation, payback or political delusion? To

<sup>2</sup> To read my works mentioned of abridged in this essay, visit [www.carloszilio.com](http://www.carloszilio.com).

go back being an artist with no ideological pressure but instead replace it with another, absolutely private one, is indeed the same existential commitment”.<sup>4</sup>

Contrariwise to artists from previous times, on arriving at Paris, I knew, as my generation knew, that the city was no longer this world's center of art and that New York notoriously had occupied its place. However, Paris proportionated me a location far away from pressure, and so I could obtain the critical displacement needed for the reflections I had to do about my artistic and political doings — thus, a double critic imposes itself, and immediately relocates to the center the artistic and political vanguardist view, ones that had been, up to this point, inseparable elements of the art and political relation. It becomes an evidence that both views (political and artistic) took themselves as natural consequences of a teleological historic process that consecrated them both as historic truth.

To remake a relation with History, and particularly with the History of Art, was a potentiality that existed because I was living in a city that made possible visitations to places from the Louvre to the Pompidou-Beaubourg Center, which was inaugurated at the time, with a great retrospective by Duchamp. Besides the immersion in parisian museums, French culture itself would have had an important repercussion in my formation, overall by means of the Annales School and the New History in its long duration sense, from Foucault's view of archeology and Hubert Damisch's conception of art history as a transitory process, that is, that History of Art is diachronic and synchronic, linear and simultaneous.

If painting is to me par excellence as a support that transits between past and present, to retake it means to understand that it had new a negative meaning, a radical discontinuity towards the world, as if estranged from it. That understanding of the crisis, of epistemological discontinuity between the support and the realistic that guided my relationship with painting.

Painting was put by history in a bad place, and to maintain its critical potential it should therefore put itself radically in the center of the crisis. To paint became, to me, to paint the painting.

Seen from a more productive angle, the work of some artists began to have a referential value in my work process. The establishment of a transitory relation that approaches Cézanne and Jasper John's ideas as the relation between modern and the modernity crisis. Cézanne's doubt is taken not as a method in the relation between sensation and real, but as an argument in the discussion of painting's

reconstruction with its historical pertinency. Barnett Newman, on the other hand, proposes a conceptual complexity and the possibility to overcome formalism as a conception of the history of art raised on the concept of sublime, next to Meyer Schapiro's concept of signifying form. These are possibilities to make the debate of painting fit an ambit of reflection, away from the demand dictated by correction devices to the likes of the art system.

To paint caused to localize, in the scope of pictorial production, productive issues capable of revealing a thought on painting itself. These objectives were defined by cultural and theoretical approaches, always referenced in pictorial pieces. Between approximately the years of 1980 and 1985, for example, I put myself to think about what is called “brazility”, that is to say, a certain view of the brazilian art that is present since the year of 1920 and that kept going strongly until the beginning of the 60s.

In a way, that would translate into my practice of putting myself in front of certain works by Tarsila do Amaral and the entire oeuvre by Alfredo Volpi, besides the evocation of a geometrical feelings given by Rio de Janeiro's scenery in the relations between mountain, sky and sea. In the same period, Greenberg's essay on abstract post-expressionism makes me think of a series of questionings that objectively result in seeking for a relation towards the chromatic and spacial sense of Monet/Volpi's, Matisse/Manet and posteriorly Rousseau's works. “Brazility” and abstraction, forwarder to a limitation border, end up in an excess that wanted to explore Rousseau and exoticism.

On this forwarding, Wilson Coutinho wrote: “It is a dialectic of return with the conscious sense of present. In this system, Zilio's work does not seek to turn back, but to clash with a complicated net of plastic questionings. Never, in Zilio's painting, will an encyclopedia of straight quotes come up, but it shelters procedures and problematic questions nonetheless. How to make “plain painting” become “committed painting”, a painting of extraction of layers or combination of procedures to both altitudes? At the same time, how to keep a pattern of recognition — astuteness that does not wish the forgetting of Barnett Newman's existence — of sublime integrity. How not to forget it in a painting that does not wish sublime anymore? How to push it away, keeping it and afterwards how to come up to Rousseau, not forgetting to recognize Matisse, or Newman himself? ... The fascination is to organize a problem around a procedure that I've come to call “austere”, that does not

3

Paulo Venancio Filho in *Carlos Zilio*, Cosac Naify, 2006.

4

Wilson Coutinho in *Carlos Zilio*, Cosac Naify, 2006.

recognize common iconography so as to make it excessively strange.<sup>4</sup> To finish an investigation is like finishing a game match. From that point on, another match is taken, that is to say, one that deals with the re-definition of new pictorial issues to be its goal.<sup>5</sup> The next match would begin by the year 1987 and its spark was to take the blank canvas as the erased board of the previous iconographic excess and the field of the plain exercise of subjectivity. Again, elements (sandpaper, nails, saws) that previously composed my repertoire in the so-called political times reappear, and now they trace lines and planes and open themselves to a more existential issue.

A third movement, another starting line, can be seen between 1992 and 2004. It was the taking of an abstract model as the basic pattern of occupation of the canvas, and from that point on, practicing to the extreme all possibilities this pattern and neutral color that I used would give me as modern repertoire's investigation possibilities. If painting is said to have been killed by the crisis of modernity, the main issue becomes to consider once again the possibility of its re-definition. Some dialogues are inevitable: Robert Ryman and his analysis of the pictorial process; Newman and spaciality as an investigation method. When this layer of references has been used to its whole extent, both process and spaciality take us, inevitably, to once again go over this issue in the foundations of Picasso's modernity. In the same line of thought, Giacometti and Morandi become a part of it by a different temporality than that vertiginous, generally identified as being the modern one.

As a sequence and unfolding from the year of 2000, orthogonality, dialectically, gives space to a circularity that occupies the canvas. The circular gesture's continuity on the canvas' surface emphasizes the presence of the body that paints and the body of the spectator. This body evoking reminds us of Rodin but, in this case, the drawer's one more than the sculptor's one. The line's sinuosity and its rhythm allude to Matisse as well.

The quotes made in this essay, from excerpts of many artist's pieces to references to my work, do not refer to a logic of influences connected to objective procedures. What is at stake here is their inducing factor, very helpful to formulate my successive approaches of painting's investigation.

Another detachment, a new starting line, occurs around the year of 2004 and has a duration generally accepted as nowadays. If up to

this moment the historical references to artworks have worked as key points to paint paintings, now it tends to mainly wrap itself close, taking its own trajectory as its own basis, although always being subjected to new stimulus from the History of Art. With special highlighting, the relation towards my paintings from 1985 to 1987 are seen once again. These are artworks of grief. Not by chance they also showed a subjective dialogue with the abyssal and obscure colors from Rothko of the series "Seagram building". Considering, altogether, these mediations, the grief comes more as a reflection on the exercise of grief in painting than as its own existence.

This already lengthy trajectory of permanent debate over a strategy for developing complex questions, seen in painting and systematically faced, gives the whole work a unity quality characterized by fragmentation. The result is a permanent issue on the theoretical density that painting's support brings from its long cultural and historical existence. This play's sense, as I've procured to develop in this essay, is to investigate new possibilities of configuration of painting, to keep its cognitive value and to create a singular pictorial thinking.

Carlos Zilio, 2011

5

The concept of game and starting line here used were made up by Hubert Damisch. Read on this matter the explanation by Yve-Alain Bois in *Painting as Model*, MIT Press, 1990.



CARLOS ZILIO: Artist and researcher linked to the PPGAV/UFRJ (Programa de Pós-Graduação em Artes Visuais, Universidade Federal do Rio de Janeiro).

