

Becoming an Artist: the work of art beyond itself. An interview with Túlio Pinto

Quote: CALDAS, Felipe Bernardes; PINTO, Túlio. Becoming an Artist: the work of art beyond itself. An interview with Túlio Pinto. *Porto Arte: Revista de Artes Visuais*. Porto Alegre: PPGAV-UFRGS, v. 23, n. 38, p.185-191, jan.-jun. 2018. ISSN 0103-7269 | e-ISSN 2179-8001. DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.22456/2179-8001.80803>

Translated by Roberto Cataldo Costa

Abstract: The concern about how art and artists converse with production systems is not recent. It dates back at least to the 19th century. That interest gave rise to many arguments as well as functional attributions for the roles played by art and artists. How do artists converse with, share or challenge today's capitalist production system, which would be centered on information, immateriality and the fusion of work and life? This interview with Túlio Pinto provides a reflective platform to think about what it means to work with art within a dialogue between the local and the global, the systems, the markets and the circuits in which contemporary art and its agents are placed and which they cross.

Keywords: Art System. Work. Market. Contemporary art.

How do art and artists share the same means of economic production? For Rancière,¹ it would not be possible to think of art disconnected to the production relations of an epoch, for everyone would share the same sensibility. The interest in understanding how an art work is linked to a particular production model in a specific historical period has been a permanent concern held by several thinkers mainly identified with a certain “left” and holding materialistic views since the 19th century.

In the last two centuries, at least three arguments have been fully verifiable when we address the subject. Art removed from economic relations; art as a means of resistance and criticism to society of capital; and art as participant in production relations – that is, embodied in those relations. In turn, each of those arguments generates ideas about “being an artist” and its social function, along with the purposes of art itself. Therefore, several possibilities emerge: from the idea of artists as models of “free workers” as opposed to “alienated” workers to the proposition of artists as “revolutionary” agents, alongside the proletariat and at the service of human emancipation, to the view of an “entrepreneur artist”.

We certainly have other views about artists such as the “celebrity” exemplified and typified in the figure of Andy Warhol, or Ricardo Basbaum’s “Artist-etc”, among other understandings related to certain perceptions about art and its possible social attributions.

The three arguments presented here on an ideal level would be mutually exclusive, but they coexist, blend, overlap, and eventually compose certain discourses together in everyday practice and in circulation. We use them – consciously or unconsciously – as we see fit to advocate our views, the autonomy of art and even its social relevance, among many other interests and contexts.

Thus, when we displace these arguments from the theoretical level in which they were conceived and think about their influences on the several agents of art, we find that they take on other forms, contaminate each other and express themselves in a proper way according to the agent of discourse/practice and context of enunciation or movement in a particular circuit.

This interview with Túlio Pinto is an important reflective window for understanding and discussing what “being an artist” means nowadays in a country like Brazil while conversing with international art circuits. What does it mean to work with art? How does artistic work and thought expand beyond artistic production as “object”, “image”, and involves reception, institutions, the market and the art circuit? How do works and artists end up in dialogue with the current capitalist stage while they are capable of challenging it? What is the role played by media visibility in an artist’s work relations? The following interview covers this range of questions and Túlio Pinto provides us with a conscious look at the various purposes of art production and “being an artist” in the today’s world, from local to global.

The interview was conducted in 2012² and edited and revised by the interviewer and the artist in August 2017. Questions and answers from the period of the interview are maintained here, that is, neither interviewer nor interviewee have

1. RANCIÈRE, Jacques. *A Partilha do Sensível*. São Paulo: 34, 2009.

2. The interview was conducted during the writing of my master’s dissertation and is transcribed in full in its appendix. See in: CALDAS, Felipe Bernardes. *O Campo Enquanto Mercado: um estudo sobre o cenário mercadológico de Porto Alegre (1990-2012)* Master’s Dissertation. PPGAV-UFRGS, 2013.

edited the original content or “updated” answers and questions after five years separating interview and this edition.

Felipe Caldas:

Túlio, what does it mean to be a professional artist?

Túlio Pinto:

To be a professional artist is to be aware of all the roles and assemblages you have to fulfill so that the work you're developing goes further, not only in the studio or in the mental studio, but in the arts circuit. So, metaphorically, when a contemporary artist starts a work, he is the player: he passes the ball, crosses it, heads it and defends it. So, what does that mean? It means that you have to be connected to these funding tools, in selection for grants, in institutions like museums – in short, to expose yourself and risk to be selected and, perhaps, awarded; to pay attention to state funding selections, to be able to prepare an objective portfolio that is presentable for both a gallery owner and any agent of the system, making the focus of your research clear, without fancy details, without much makeup. Anyway, I think it means playing in all positions.

There is no such thing as the romantic artist who stays in the studio hoping to be discovered. Nowadays people have to go out to present their research object. I think the work actually develops both in a context of research and in a context of presentation, when it unfolds in the circuit. When you work in the studio, you have a sense of your idea, of what you conceived. When it goes out to the world – I mean exhibitions – when it circulates, you can see that work from a point of view that I consider privileged, outside of that hermetic context that is only yours, and it begins to receive some cross-readings.

From that moment on, the work begins to converse with you as well. That doesn't mean it didn't do it during production, but it's another kind of conversation. And then you begin to realize what is working out better or worse in the eyes of the third party, the observer, the audience. So I think that being aware not only of a stage of production, but also of the other stages through which the work passes contributes for that work to unfold and build readings other than its own.

FC:

How did you start circulating?

TP:

It's a bit recent, I guess. It seems like a long time ago, but it's not. I think it has a lot to do with the answer to your first question. I'm a communicative person by nature and I take great risks, both in what I do poetically and in what I do with my personal stance. So I think circulation at work comes a lot from that: from being open to these tools that I have already mentioned in your previous question, applying for state grants with works, in other words, taking risks in this sense, but also circulating within the pathways offered by the system and through established contacts, which become friendships.

That is, making the idea pervade the place – more than the work itself, more than an object, it's the idea, the concept of the work – that is the direction I've been walking on. Regardless of preserving form – that's important, I'm careful about that – I believe that the heart of the matter lies in a conceptual stance regarding how the work is assembled, conceived, and the pathways it travels.

So, trying not get away from the question, trying to keep on it, I think the political side, but not the – let's call it bad – side of politics which is lobbying, it's not about that. The political side of the political being, the sociable being, the gregarious human being, of using this communication... because the work communicates, but the artist is also part of the work. Artists are in their work. So many aspects of my discourse as a person are there, synthesized in a poetic way.

So, taking this speech with me also in this personal encounter, being with other artists or a critic or a gallery owner; that is, to put it in the arena, in debate, in discussion, so maybe something will derive from it or not. Then you are prepared for when opportunities appear and you have material to take advantage of them.

I think it's about not excluding the possibilities, being open even to the challenges that the work demands from you. And an artist's place within a circuit already established, which has its rules, but there are many routes anyway. There are several paths, you don't have to fight, they are choices.

Depending on what you want or what you would like, it doesn't mean that you will get it either. You take one route, then you take another, only assembling that displacement.

FC:

How did *Subterrânea*³ assist you in your career as an artist?

TP:

Subterrânea is very important in the careers of all the artists who are part of it, that's for sure. I can't tell what it would be like without it, but I'm fully aware that *Subterrânea* was a platform. It is a platform also for all artists we bring in, which I think is its main function, to show works of artists we believe in, from here and from other places, from Porto Alegre, from the area. So much so that only one or two of nearly 40 exhibitions we've held so far included works by artists who are members of *Subterrânea*. All others did not.

So this is not the politics of space. Artists who work there work as agents, as cultural producers. But even though it does not present, even though the exhibition space and the physical space are not used to show works by artists who work there, who are the agents, *Subterrânea* is a tool to make the work of these artists known by people in places other than Southern Brazil.

And I very much believe in *Subterrânea* as a school, in the sense of perceiving this professional aspect that is necessary for a career to leave the place of a person who is still studying, who is researching, and move to a professional place. What would that be? It would be like having this notion of all spheres, of all the meanders that compose this landscape, which is the system, the market. To realize, through our initiative, that the market in Porto Alegre is small, it's schizophrenic, it's a bit bizarre, I'd say. It's something I don't know.

I always think about it a lot and I talk to people about it. I know there are people who buy, that there are collectors. Since we have a space that sells works, I don't know if we are doing it wrong, but I know that people who buy are not in *Subterrânea*, you know, they are not part of it. That's one thing we've been

thinking about. Because I know that galleries like Bolsa de Arte or Gestual sell and they sell to people from outside the state, from the state, people who don't circulate, who don't expose themselves, who don't appear.

So *Subterrânea* also serves as an index in that sense of showing that there are alternative ways and forms of being a collector, which we tried for a few years, making those small formats, selling raffles. Then we realized that it was a mechanism that worked very well for major exhibitions, with many artists, and relevant ones. There, these artists were like anchors, and people who wanted to try their luck to win that work, or someone like Cildo Meireles, Senise, Nelson Felix, Mauro Fuke, Eliane Tedesco – they invested money there. But when it was a solo exhibition, a single artist, who put a job up for a raffle, even being a relevant artist like Raul Mourão, who has been important artist in that context since the 1980s, he was starting in the 1980 generation. In his exhibition the sale of the raffle was ridiculous, and that embarrassed us before an artist we brought and who realizes that all that buzz, all that action couldn't result in something for the space.

So this is a bit frustrating, both for us and for him, who wouldn't earn anything from it, but he wanted the space to benefit somehow from that, because he understood the raffle discourse, what we intended with it, and was willing to help. So we realized that these kinds of mechanisms didn't work in some specific cases. I think this denotes some things that should not be mentioned now. But I think *Subterrânea* is important in that regard. It's a laboratory. It's a laboratory that shows these reality layers of the system in Porto Alegre.

FC:

How did you enter the market?

TP:

It happened as I think it usually does. Of course there are exceptions, but artists rarely enter a gallery simply by sending a portfolio by email without knowing the people who are there or without someone who knows and refers them. So what happened to me was that Jailton Moreira, with Julieta Machado, who works at SESC in São Paulo, were selecting artists for a show at SESC, which was called Tripé, by Ampla Callis and I and

3. The Subterrânea Studio was an independent visual arts space located in Porto Alegre, Rio Grande do Sul and managed by artists Lilian Maus, Túlio Pinto, James Zortéa, Guilherme Dable and Gabriel Netto. Between 2006 and 2015, it held several exhibitions, courses, lectures, performances, and other artistic activities that marked the local art scene and maintained an important national dialogue.

a lot of other people, and they selected Rômulo Vieira Conceição, Gisela Waetge and I.

So I participated in that exhibition, and I was there in São Paulo because of that. It was a very circumstantial thing. I met a person through a friend of mine – a mutual friend. She asked me what I did and I said I was an artist, but she asked what I did as an artist. I found showing easier than talking. Then I showed her some things on the computer, and she said: “Look, I have a friend of mine who is the director of a gallery, I think he’ll like your stuff”. And that was it.

But we hear a lot of that. So I’d heard things like that at other times, which came to nothing. I had no expectation or anything. And then, in fact, they sent me an email inviting me to take part in a group exhibition that was to take place in Baró, and then, on the opening day Adriano, who is one of the directors, and Maria, who is the owner, came to invite me to work with them. That’s how it happened.

FC:

Túlio, do you make a living out of art today?

TP:

No, I don’t. So all I can say is that I’m a lucky guy, for the family I have, that help me, they help me to this day. I don’t have a sales flow that allows me to rent an apartment and pay for fixed monthly expenses. That’s impossible. If I wanted to do that, I’d still have to rely on my parents’ help. Which I find strange, curious, because I started painting a year and a half or a year before entering the Arts Institute. I thought I was going to be a painter. Then I joined it and before that, since I had been approved for the second semester, in 2005, I studied at Lage Park, I took a course with Charles Watson and my priorities and intentions as an artist changed.

I’ll summarize it so I don’t extend it. What happened was that my interest in my research, in my production, has been increasingly detached from the object – so this is somewhat paradoxical. Sometimes there’s even a short circuit – because being inside a commercial gallery demands producing objects. The gallery is a shop. After all it’s a shop. So what happened was that there were avenues that I was able to open, which are those awards that happen because the works I have done in sculpture are

ephemeral or very dangerous; they are not works that a collector would have at home safely. They are best for institutions. So, since 2010 I have been able to apply for some things in some places, I won a few acquisition awards, which I consider like selling works, because the institution buys it, the museum buys it, with that award.

Now, the gallery has recently sold a work to Ribeirão Preto’s Figueiredo Ferraz Institute. But what I can tell you is that I have circulating through this place, which is more uncertain, it’s a bit more abstract, because the concept itself, of course the projects derive in products, drawings, photographs, which are salable, which are well susceptible of being in the market. But that’s not my focus. My focus is on the work itself, like loading bricks up and down, contextualizing two public places – a closed one and an open one; that’s the product for me. If a photograph, a catalog or a drawing result from it, they are byproducts, they are documents of that work.

Now I have been recently selected for FUNARTE’s Redes grant, which is also a work of displacement, a little more extensive, with a good couple of days there to do it, but it will also result in drawings, photographs, videos. These things can be set in a market context. Whether they will sell or not is another matter. But that’s a complicated but necessary place.

Knowing that I’m in a gallery, that I have to meet some demands too without running away from what interests me, because I don’t do business, like doing something because I have to sell it or because I found a formula that worked out – all that makes me uncomfortable.

FC:

What’s your work routine like?

TP:

I always say that, so I’m sorry for repeating myself, but I haven’t said that to you. I have been spending less and less time in a studio environment, drawing or painting. What happens is that my mental studio is very busy, because I’m interested in the interconnections I have been producing.

These things are born within a speculative system, of selecting objects, of looking at the world and filtering it, and absorbing and selecting things from that place, from that world that interests

me as an object. So, what can I say? My work routine has a lot to do with the next challenge. This year of 2012 was very intense. Quite intense! I traveled a lot and I showed my work abroad. I did two projects in São Paulo. So now it's really the time for trying to do nothing, for looking carefully at the things that have been done, knowing their importance, but knowing that everything has its moment and its time of existence because, as I told you, I'm detaching myself from this place.

I already understood what happens to some things I've done, and developing them further would just be a rearrangement exercise. And I don't think that motivates me. So now I have been thinking and preparing for next year's project, which will be that of Redes, which I was selected for, a project that will demand a lot from my body, from my health, from my preparation to do. And pre-production as well. Then we go back to the beginning, because the artist's place is very relative, as well as the way he works.

But regarding certain types of work, there must be a pre-production and mapping work that is also part of the work. It is the case of this project, which will be done in Rio Grande do Norte – and that's a large geographic displacement.

So that's what happens. I keep the studio, *Subterrânea* is no longer my studio in the sense of producing drawings, paintings, because that's not *Subterrânea's* purpose for any artist that takes part in it. It's a space that works with a rotation of things, which does not allow you to leave something resting on the wall and then come back later and look at it. That's why all artists who worked at *Subterrânea*, using it as a studio, ended up going to another studio. So I keep the studio, where I have my papers, where there is frame, canvas, paint, these things to draw and paint, if that's the case. As I walk on the street while I live my daily life, my mind keeps projecting, and then I write things down on a notebook, I draw sketches, and that's how I work.

FC:

Can you separate art from life, art from work?

TP:

I think I have been separating them less and less. And I think that my discomfort, in a good way – I won't say I'm in a crisis, but it's a moment of reflection – it has a lot to do with that, because

there are ephemeral works, for example, transposition, I used six thousand sidewalk concrete blocks. What was I going to do with those blocks, bro? Got it? It's a precious material to many people. So I ended up donating them to an NGO that was undergoing renovation and it turned into an audio studio, a video studio for that NGO. And then it becomes part of the work's context. It was material from the industry, with a specific purpose, it was moved, it became work, it was impregnated with poetics, and it returned to the world and now it's wall. It's there, nobody knows it and it's not the case of saying it.

But I particularly worry about what comes after that. I believe that relationships... When someone has someone's work at home, it is to materialize a desire. There is also the market speculative aspect – it's money. Depending on the artist, you know that its value will have increased 200% within two years, right? It's investment. But there is also that kind of purchase that happens because the guy really liked your work. Your work's value might increase, I don't know, but he liked you, and that is the materialization of that contact he had with you. It's not you on his wall, but it's a piece of you.

So why am I saying this? It seems a bit odd, but it's not. Building relationships is what naturally establishes this other place that people are talking about, the market, the system, in a healthy way. So sometimes, it seems to me that there is dissociation between the artist, the audience, the curator who has gained more and more importance and is more important than the artist. It's a bit bizarre, but those are some inversions that happen and which I think are very dangerous when in fact this should all be very close. It may seem a bit utopian, but I believe in it more and more. So this relationship built between what is, this space between you and me, this volume that exists between you and me, between me and this gentleman who is on my side, is what pervades these relations. And the work is nothing more than a confirmation of those relations. Does it make sense?

FC:

It does, poetically.

TP:

Yes. It's just that I've been reading a lot of Borriaud. So these

works I build, where I establish these balances, I never work alone. I always call someone. I used to work a lot with Gerson, who is an assembler, and other people as well. And these people give their opinions, they make suggestions. So it's a living thing, you know? It's in my interest, it's part of me. But the moment the person is there and buys the idea, they also own it a little bit.

FC:

Back to the gallery. How does it help you or can it help you or has it been helping you?

TP:

The gallery is a legitimating tool, somehow. There are galleries and galleries. The gallery I work with has already referred me for some things. One of these projects in São Paulo was under its referral. The exhibition in Denmark I participated in – a group exhibition I was invited to – it was because the curator was researching Brazilian artists in Brazilian galleries and he found me on the gallery's website. So I think it's an important platform.

Another important aspect is that the gallery is a partner. And it is healthy to work this way, in the sense of dividing the burdens so as not to overburden the artist because the art gallery is a very comfortable space. In what sense? The gallery has a team of artists. Some sell more, others sell less. Artists only counts on themselves. They don't have that flexibility the gallery has: "Oh, that guy is not selling anything, but that woman is selling like hell". And it sells for high prices, so the Gallery is fine.

It's a partner in this sense of helping the artist because I believe that if the gallery is with an artist it's because it saw something in that work, some potential. If it hadn't seen anything, it would not have called them – precisely because it's a business. It makes no sense for you to have a piece with no ripple effect, that doesn't vibrate, that doesn't play any role. If the artist is there and nothing happens, he or she shouldn't be there. But sometimes the artist needs to be encouraged as well, to show work, but also be encouraged.

FC:

For you as an artist, what is the relevance of appearing in newspapers, networks, magazines, and seeing your production flowing in the media?

TP:

I think it's very important. I'm very grateful to some journalists here in Porto Alegre, who seem to find what I do relevant, but this creates something very crazy because people see you and this generates prestige that doesn't translate into financial well-being. So people think you're in a place you're not. "Look, I saw you in the paper. That work is fucking good, etc...". But then you're broken! Prestige is not the same as capital.

I think it's important in terms of showcasing, because it makes the work circulate. But I think what is lacking here in Porto Alegre and in most of Brazil, with some exceptions, is really criticism. Criticism that speaks of what is being shown in a constructive way, pointing out positive and negative things; that is, taking stock, criticizing it. This hasn't happened for a while. What happens are texts that legitimize the work, when something appears and when someone decides to write a critique. An example is what happened in the last Mercosur Biennial, when someone wrote a newspaper critique about the exhibition. Then the director of an institution that was hosting it, instead of writing an answer and publishing it in the newspaper, sent an e-mail personally attacking that person.

So we go back there at the beginning of the conversation and talk about professionalism. That guy is not professional. That person is the director of a major public institution and responds to criticism published in the newspaper with a personal e-mail. That's not professional. So I miss that, reading works that exercise more criticism – exercises in criticism. These people who are willing to do this, with rare exceptions, do not exercise criticism; they endorse it in a way.

FC:

On this subject – market, system – which we ended up talking about in general, is there anything I haven't asked, but you consider important for us to talk?

TP:

Just to point out that this market we have been talking about, which we've been calling the market – and it is the market – it doesn't happen only through one way. There are several ways to do it. These independent initiatives exist, it's not by chance; it is precisely a response to that space the market doesn't provide

you, and you end up generating these alternatives and finding a market for your own work. What happens is that the traditional forms – let's call them that – of selling works of art, which are the galleries, they are very limited here in Porto Alegre, we don't have a gallery system. For a city that has been hosting an international art event for 16 years, I think there's a part of that engine that is not working right.

Túlio Pinto: was born in Brasília, Brazil, 1974. He lives and works in Porto Alegre. He graduated from UFRGS Institute of Arts. The artist is represented by Galeria Baró, São Paulo. His exhibitions include: *Blue and Unicorn*, Baró Gallery, São Paulo, Brazil, 2016; *Onloaded: Túlio Pinto, Phoenix Institute of Contemporary Art (phica)*, 2015, Phoenix, Arizona – USA; Bienal de Vancouver – Vancouver, Canada, 2014; *De territórios, abismos e intenções, Projeto Contemporâneo RS* – Santander Cultural Porto Alegre, Porto Alegre, 2013; *CEP: corpo, espaço e rota*, Galeria IFRN, Natal, 2013; Terra, Galeria Baró, São Paulo, 2013; *Salvaje – Digesting Europe Piece by Piece – Traneudstillingen Exhibition Space, Copenhagen* – Denmark, 2012; *Transposição* – Galeria Augusto Meyer – Casa de Cultura Mario Quintana, Porto Alegre, 2012; Nova Escultura Brasileira – Caixa Cultural Rio de Janeiro, among others. Pinto has received several awards, including: Acquisition Award: 65° Salão Paranaense | Museu de Arte Contemporânea do Paraná – MAC / PR | Curitiba, PR, Brazil – 2014; Acquisition Award – Prêmio ARTIGO Rio 2013 – Artist's Residence Program ARTIGO Rio / ARTTOWN, Amsterdam, The Netherlands; 9ª Rede Nacional Funarte – 2013 – CEP: corpo, espaço e rota – Brazil; 2011; Acquisition Award Leonello Berti 35° SARP – Ribeirão Preto, SP, 2010; IV Prêmio Açorianos de Artes Visuais – Destaque em Escultura 2009 – Porto Alegre, RS, among others. His works are part of the following collections: Phoenix College Art Collection | Phoenix – Arizona – USA; Mesa Community College Gallery | Mesa, Arizona, USA; Senac SP, São Bernardo do Campo | SP, Brazil; Museu de Arte Contemporânea do Paraná, Curitiba, Brazil; Fundação Cultural Itajaí, Itajaí, SC, Brazil; Instituto Figueiredo Ferraz, Ribeirão Preto, SP, Brazil; Usina Cultural Energisa | João Pessoa, PB, Brazil; Museu de Arte Contemporânea do Rio Grande do Sul, Porto Alegre, RS, Brazil; MARCO – Museu de Arte Contemporânea de Campo Grande, Campo Grande, MS, Brazil; Museu Nacional de Brasília, Brasília, DF, Brazil; Museu de Arte de Ribeirão Preto, Ribeirão Preto, SP, Brazil; Galeria Municipal

de Arte Aldo Locatelli – Porto Alegre, RS, Brazil. In recent years he has participated in artist's residencies in countries such as Ukraine, Canada, Portugal, USA, UK, and The Netherlands.

Felipe Bernardes Caldas: was born in Porto Alegre in 1986. He holds a PhD in Visual Arts with emphasis in Art History, Theory and Criticism from PPGAV-UFRGS, a Master's Degree from the same graduate program, a Bachelor's and a Teacher's Degree in Visual Arts from the UFRGS Institute of Arts. His academic research studies focus on systemic relations, specifically reflecting on art markets.

(*)This text was submitted in September 2017.