

Luiz Camillo Osorio in conversation with Berna Reale

Luiz Camillo Osorio: What made you become an artist? Did you train as an artist? Who are the artists that have most influenced your career?

Berna Reale: I never thought I would become an artist. In fact, I did my entrance exams for medicine, business administration and law, but I never dreamt of pursuing any of these careers. I was very young when I sat for my first entrance exam – at 16, I didn't really know what I wanted to be. I opted for the arts because I met a person who told me that I should train as an art teacher, that it was really up my street. I tried to find out what it meant to be an art teacher and did the entrance exam, but I didn't fall in love with art at university. I fell in love with it when I was working for a foundation for underprivileged children in the outskirts of Belem, that is when I discovered my vocation for art.

When I was at university, I was keen on works by Tunga, Regina Silveira and Cildo, but I'm not sure I was "influenced" by them. I believe that what has actually "influenced" me is the world of arts and its endless possibilities. Learning about semiotics at university was a turning point in my training. Even now, I always study and observe what I want to achieve, and semiotics plays a crucial role.

LCO: Could you please talk a bit about the relationship between your work as a photographer/ forensic expert in Belem and your poetic work which is closely related to violence? I'm asking you this because, at first, there seems to be an obvious motivation, but the way you produce your work seems to be more subtle and more violent than just a mere spin-off from your documenting work. Could you please tell us how you see this?

BR: In fact, I'm a Forensic Expert, and in the State of Para this job is not part of the Police force, it's more linked to the Security Department because Forensic Science works with the Police in crime scenes. In this case, I'm not a Forensic Photographer but a Forensic Expert responsible for producing a criminal report flagging out all the traces found in the crime scene and their potential connections with the crime.

My involvement with photography happened before I became a forensic expert.

Regarding the issue of expressing violence through my work, it was art that led me to become a forensic expert. It was while photographing bodies for one of my exhibitions that I learnt about forensic science and became involved in this field. The subtle approach in which my work deals with violence has to do with my fascination with semiotics. There are thousands of ways in which one can talk about violence through semiotics and its codes and subtle symbols.

Semiotics is key to understanding art. In my opinion, if an artist can't express their work through images, then their work is compromised. One doesn't need to show blood to express violence. Images should be able to speak for themselves and be fully round.

Luiz Camillo Osorio: What is it like to work with performance art and its spin-offs in video and/or photography? Which one do you find more interesting in terms of language?

BR: I like working with performance art through photography and video. I enjoy street performance because it produces a different kind of adrenaline, an energy that depletes, but also nourishes. The problem is that performance art is a very lengthy process and very expensive and, therefore, one can't put it on as often as one wishes. It requires a lot of planning.

It's getting harder and harder for me to do it because I always long to do something that I haven't done before and on a larger scale. I'm quite hard on myself and as a result, I have my mind on huge projects which result in higher cost, more preparation, a larger team, etc.

LCO: Feminist issues, such as the violence experienced by women in a male chauvinist and patriarchal society like Brazil's, is a constant presence in your work. Do you see yourself as a feminist artist?

BR: I've never perceived myself as the standard-bearer for feminism because I want to talk about everything that bothers me. If I choose to talk about violence against women is because I find it unsettling. If by believing that the world should be more just towards women, with less prejudice, where women shouldn't always be portrayed as submissive, then I am a feminist, but I don't like to be pigeonholed or labelled. I am an artist who is free to speak about whatever I wish. I care for everything that is related to the collective and human experience regardless of race, belief, sex or gender.

LCO: Could you please tell us a bit about your working process. Who films? Who edits? How long does it take to prepare your performances?

BR: I've just finished the longest art performance I ever produced in my life – Skin Workout. Never before did I take so long to prepare a performance: precisely one year and a half! Too long, too difficult and took expensive, requiring a production team of more than twenty people. Just the photography and film crew included eight members. If a piece of work of this scale were conducted by a foundation or an institution that would have been okay, but this one concerned the work of one artist, and had to rely on the financial support of twenty-eight people to make it feasible. I have a team which has been working with me for some years, most of them since Palomo. But they don't work exclusively for me, and I only see them when I'm about to start producing a new piece.

I wish I had the means to take them with me around the world, taking photos and filming. This is my dream, but I know it is difficult. Sometimes I wonder, if I were a rich artist, I would love to have a team that is each time more in tune with my vision, but I don't have a workshop or an exclusive team ;)

Yes, I do edit my work with my cameraman, Diego, who films my performances and who is also the cinematographer. I make sure that I choose every single frame. I'm not emotionally mature enough to hand in my work as a director to anyone else. I need to be in charge of all stages of my work: from conception to execution. My boyfriend Victor helps me with everything, including taking pictures. Without him, it would have been an impossible task. He is very organised. Even though I fully trust him, I keep an eye on everything, demanding things, I'm unbearable.

LCO: How well has your work been viewed abroad?

BR: Slowly and gradually, things are happening. People who are involved in performance art has seen some of my work, or at least they have heard about it. Learning about the repercussion of my work abroad, even if it is tiny, it makes me happy; imagine an artist who was born 53 years ago in the middle of the Amazon Rainforest, when it was impossible to envisage the advent of internet; imagine someone who came from a family with no resources, who first went to São Paulo at the age of 29, doing her first solo exhibition in São Paulo at 49, and exhibiting her work at the Venice Biennale! I'm a lucky artist, aren't I? Well, I know how hard and what it entails to have one's work recognised abroad. I'm very happy with my work.

I've achieved quite a lot, and I try not to raise people's expectations and by working with excitement and luck I may be able to show what I do to people in other parts of the world.