



Accomplished Things

Adriano Costa *and* Paulo Monteiro *discuss the mundane dimensions of their art*

by BRUNO DUNLEY

Bruno Dunley: *When I first started to think about this conversation, it occurred me that a common ground I perceive in both your work is an interest in the boundary of an art object. Both bodies of work seem to exist in a frontier where this boundary is at the same time questioned and demarcated, although in distinctly different ways and with almost antagonistic points of departure.*

Paulo Monteiro: When I first saw Adriano's work, I realized it had some connection with what I do. I did not know exactly what, but it made me think of some works I made back in 1986. That was the year I stopped painting and started doing sculptures. Those works no longer exist, they have been dismantled, but there is still some photographic documentation. I used wood, metal, caulking compound, rubber, which I then nailed together or leaned on the wall. I did it basically with everything I could find. At the time I had in mind a quote by Philip Guston in which he talks about being in his studio and looking at loads of paint on the floor, and he asks himself why it was considered "dead" on the floor but gained life on the canvas. This transition of something dead to something living was interesting to me. I kept thinking: "I'll do something about it!" And as I did, I asked myself: "Is it already something or not?" So, I think there was something of these boundaries you

*Paulo Monteiro
Untitled (2014)
Courtesy of the Artist and
Mendes Wood DM, São
Paulo*



mentioned here, which remains part of my work yet today, because the transient aspect of those sculptures turns the work somewhat into a dance: it is a gesture you make and no one else will ever see it again.

Adriano Costa: Dancing must be another common ground between us. You do dance, right?

PM: I do classical ballet classes with my sister, Zélia Monteiro, who is a dancer.

AC: Well, I recall having seen a spectacle by Lucinda Childs that really impressed me. The presentation had a progressive sequence of movements. I see something of that dynamic in my work. Many times, I make works that are destroyed, but after a week or a year, they become something else. I am truly terrified of discarding things. In my studio there are pieces of cropped-out brush strokes that are kept for whatever reason, which might fit in as a solution or departure point at a given moment.

PM: Once I went to the street holding a sculpture with a loose structure that I wanted to weld. It was a piece of iron with two tips, two barrels, and I wanted to do something with it. I took it to the welding guy

and he said: "What are you going to do with this? Is it an antenna? An exhaust pipe?" Then I thought it could actually be an exhaust pipe, indeed. If I gave it to him, what would it be? An exhaust pipe. It really encompasses an ambiguous condition.

BD: *When I mention this antagonism in reaching the boundary condition of the art object, as I see in your works, I am not only referring to this aspect in the finished work, but also in its point of departure. In Adriano's case, the bottom line is accumulation. The work emerges through the articulation of mundane, apparently disposable artifacts that have predefined roles in society, as well as the remains of failed attempts at previous works. These junctions are delicate and often retain a sense of craftsmanship, which reinforces the meaningful, fragile aspect of a human presence while simultaneously activating a perception of strength and assertion when the work is finished.*

I have the impression that Adriano's works are always posing the question: "What is a sculpture? What is an art object?" They do it at the same time they claim autonomy and thoughtfulness in order to exist. This is where I see the idea of the boundary. His works are always struggling to remain alive, walking a tightrope.

AC: Many times, I do things that do not work out,

Adriano Costa
International Division of
Labour - 1 (2014)
Courtesy of the Artist and
Peep-Hole, Milan
Photography by Andrea
Rossetti

BD: *What do you mean precisely by “internal dimension”? Does it relate to the intimate character of the object?*

PM: I’m not sure how to define it, but there are many works of art in which the parts relate to an external space, the surrounding space. In an installation by Carl Andre, for instance, you are outside it and will remain so, but in dialogue with the space of the work. I feel that in Brazilian art this happens a bit differently, in general. In Hélio Oiticica’s works, the *Penetrável* [Penetrable] (1960s) series or the *Nests* (1970), for instance, you literally need to enter into it — there is always an internal pulse. This also happens metaphorically, and the titles reinforce this aspect. I do not know why things are like that in Brazilian art — and even in our works, to some extent.

BD: *On the other hand, some of Adriano’s works, like Flag (2103), lead me to question identity, the demarcation of territories and power. Such questions are reinforced by the titles of the works, which confer other layers of meaning. In A Place Built to be Destroyed (2102), for instance, the title is pretty meaningful. It is as if part of his work was raised from a wasteland that is, at the same time, the world we live in and also the territory of art, with all that has been done to its boundaries and definitions over the past century. I also see some of this in Nós estamos às moscas [We were left nothing but flies] (2012).*

AC: *A Place Built to be Destroyed* was made with lace, a very common material in handicraft work, which is also widely associated with the feminine universe. The work has these colors — blue, yellow, red — that can lead you directly to Mondrian. But when we think of the role of lace in the world, there is no such thing as this intersection of strong colors. This work has a formal aspect that is a clue, but actually I want to reach something else, which is a perspective of gender and behavioral attitudes.

When you think of the market value of handicraft, it is very low — that is, a work born to be killed. In this world of exchanges it has one of the lowest values. What are the layers of sense you want to be in physical evidence in a work of art? For me, they are countless. I see that in Monteiro’s work as well. That thing you mentioned about the material being fragile and tough at the same time, you know?

PM: I think there is this clue, indeed. Maybe the work of art is only a trail of thought, a junction of both material and immaterial natures, a sort of cerebral act.

AC: In my case, it is quite mundane, and becoming increasingly more so.

BD: *But this does not make the work lose its reflexive power and commingle once and for all with the other artifacts of the world. It also mistrusts the totality of this mixture*

*This page:
Adriano Costa
Lotus (2014)
Courtesy of the Artist and
Sadie Coles, London*

*Next page, above:
Paulo Monteiro
Untitled (1989)
Courtesy of the Artist and
Mendes Wood DM,
São Paulo*

*Next page, below:
Adriano Costa
International Division of
Labour - 2 (2014)
Courtesy of the Artist and
Peep-Hole, Milan
Photography by Andrea
Rossetti*



and saves a place to return such capacity to the world in a critical and poetic manner.



AC: In reality, when I say it is mundane, this is actually the place I want to reach.

BD: To go back to the store where you bought the materials?

AC: Totally. I feel like there is a beginning that later leads somewhere else and then returns. What are the possibilities of communication of a work of art in the world?

PM: I think nowadays there is a homogenization between the “objects of the world” and the “objects of art.” This issue concerns us, but I do not perceive much difference between doing paintings, sculptures or wall pieces. I am not worried about the status of the object — whether it is a sculpture, a painting, etc. What I am interested in is this transition of the common object into something “living.” I am interested in transforming a piece of wood, for example, into something that barely looks like a piece of wood.

(Translated from Portuguese by Daniel Lühmann)



Adriano Costa (b. 1975, Brazil) lives in São Paulo. Solo shows: Peep-Hole, Milan; Zabłudowicz Collection, London; Mendes Wood DM, São Paulo; Sadie Coles HQ, London; Galerie Krinzinger, Wien; Galeria Nuno Centeno, Porto; Centro Cultural São Paulo. Group shows: Musée D'Art Contemporain de Lyon; Guggenheim Museum, New York; Casa do Povo, São Paulo; Galeria A Gentil Carioca, Rio de Janeiro; Supportico Lopez, Berlin; Astrup Fearnley Museet, Oslo; Travesía Cuatro, Madrid; Simon Lee Gallery, London. Upcoming shows: MAM, Rio de Janeiro (group); David Kordansky Gallery, Los Angeles (solo).

Paulo Monteiro (b. 1961, Brazil) lives in São Paulo. Solo shows: Mendes Wood DM, São Paulo; Galeria Marília Razuk, São Paulo; Carlos Carvalho Galeria de Arte, Lisbon; Pinacoteca do Estado de São Paulo. Group shows: David Zwirner, New York; Lisson Gallery, London; Pivô, São Paulo; Caixa Cultural, Rio de Janeiro; MAM, São Paulo; 22nd Bienal de São Paulo. Upcoming shows: Mendes Wood DM, São Paulo (solo).

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